

The *Master* of Ragnarok & Blesser of *Einherjar*

BY SEIICHI TAKAYAMA
ILLUSTRATION: YUKISAN

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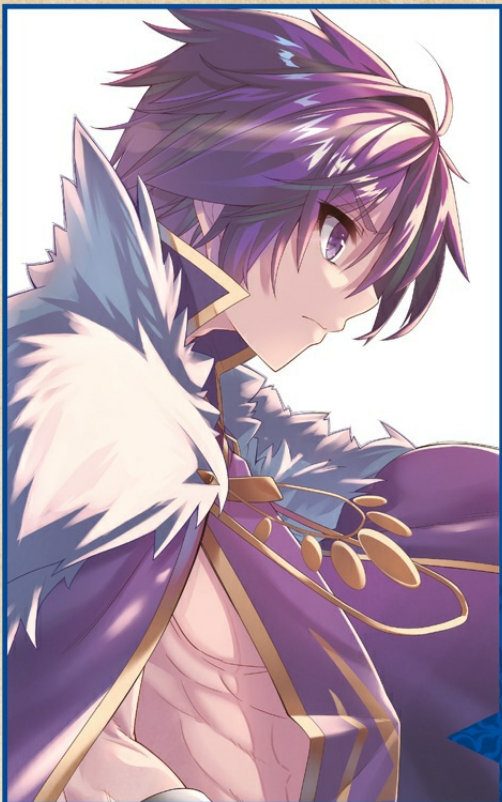


Sigrún stood up, picking up her cloak which she'd laid on top of a nearby boulder.

"At any rate, I've made up my mind."

STEEL

Characters



Yuuto Suoh

A young man summoned to Yggdrasil from the modern era. Now serving as the reginarch or "Great Lord" that reigns over the Steel Clan's many subordinate clans.



Mitsuki Shimoya

Yuuto's soulmate and dear childhood friend. Chose to become a resident of Yggdrasil to be at his side.

Sigrún

Yuuto's sworn younger sister. A powerful warrior who bears the rune Hati, Devourer of the Moon and claims the title of Mánagarmr, the Strongest Silver Wolf.



Felicia

Yuuto's sworn younger sister and loyal adjutant. She bears the rune Skirnir, the Expressionless Servant.



Kristina & Albertina

Twin daughters of the Claw Clan patriarch Botvid and Yuuto's sworn younger sisters. Both are Einherjar who can control the wind. They command the Vindálfs, the Steel Clan's intelligence service.



STEEL



Hildegard

An Einherjar bearing the rune Úlfhéðinn, the Wolfskin. Under the direction of her mentor Rún, she is improving greatly as a warrior.



Linnea

Yuuto's sworn younger sister. Manages the domestic politics of the Steel Clan as its Second-in-Command and also serves as the patriarch of the Horn Clan.

Hveðrungr

A masked man with the rune Alþjófr, Jester of a Thousand Illusions. Beneath the mask, he is Loptr, Felicia's older brother by blood—and Wolf Clan exile for his crimes against its late patriarch.



Ingrid

Gifted workshop director and Yuuto's sworn daughter. An Einherjar who bears the rune Ívaldi, Birther of Blades.



Homura

Nobunaga's daughter and a twin-runed Einherjar. Currently undergoing massive personal growth.

Ran

Nobunaga's irreplaceable and most loyal retainer. Sacrificed his life in battle to save Nobunaga.

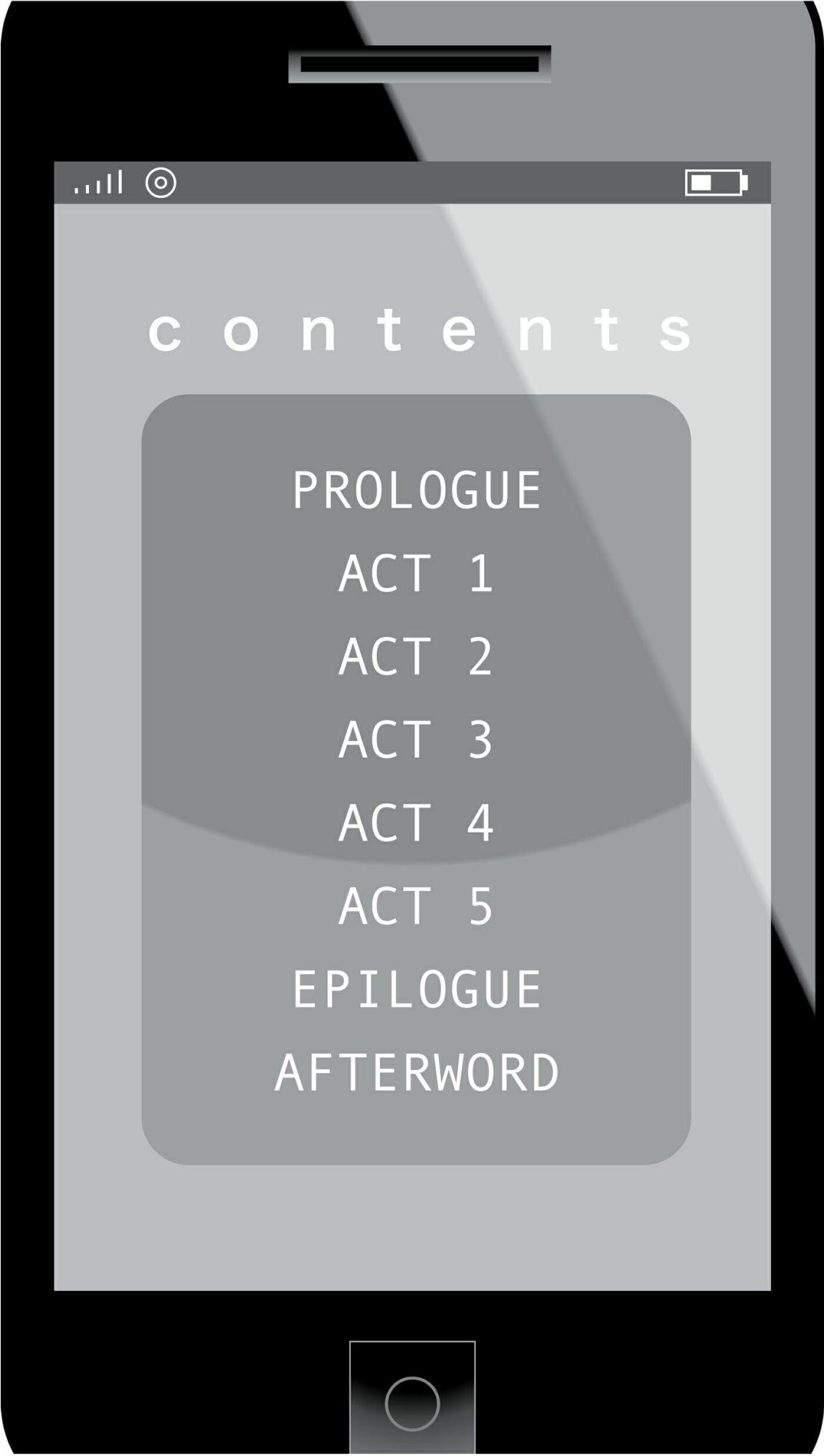


Oda Nobunaga

The greatest warlord of Japan's Warring States Period. He was summoned to Yggdrasil through a strange twist of fate. Seeks to conquer the continent as ruler of the Flame Clan.



FLAME



c o n t e n t s

PROLOGUE

ACT 1

ACT 2

ACT 3

ACT 4

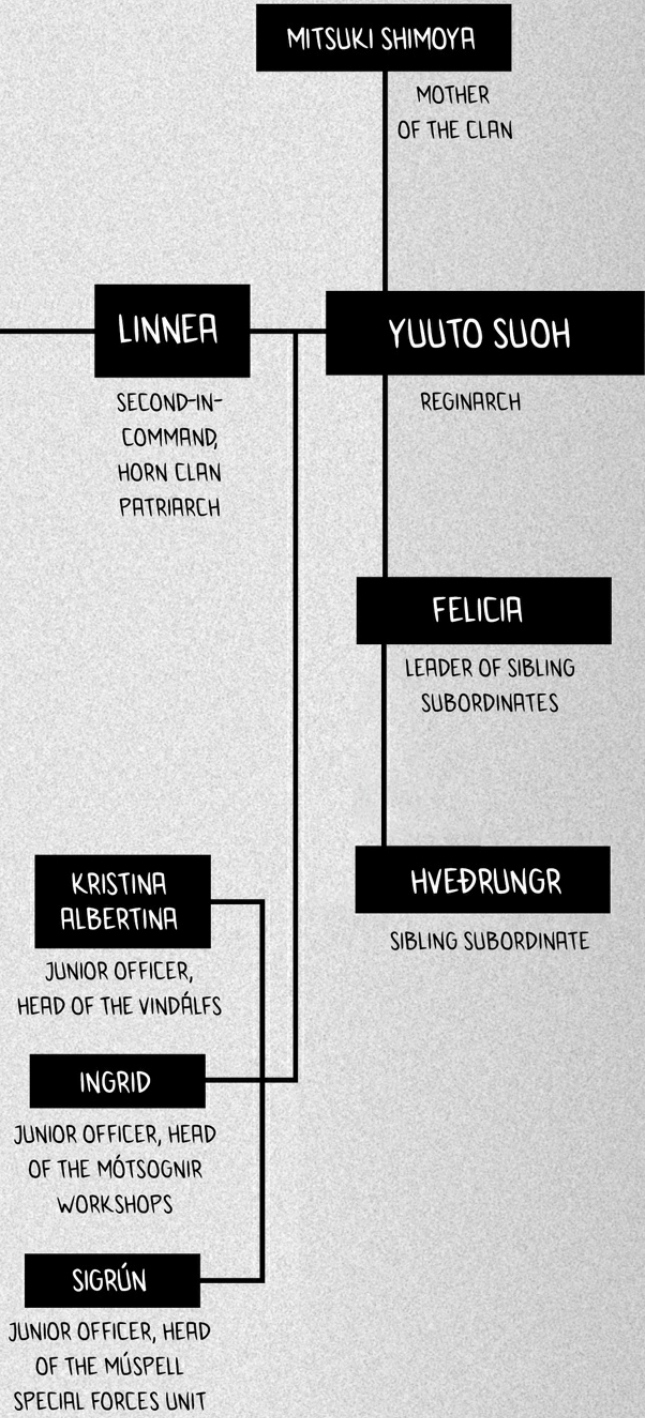
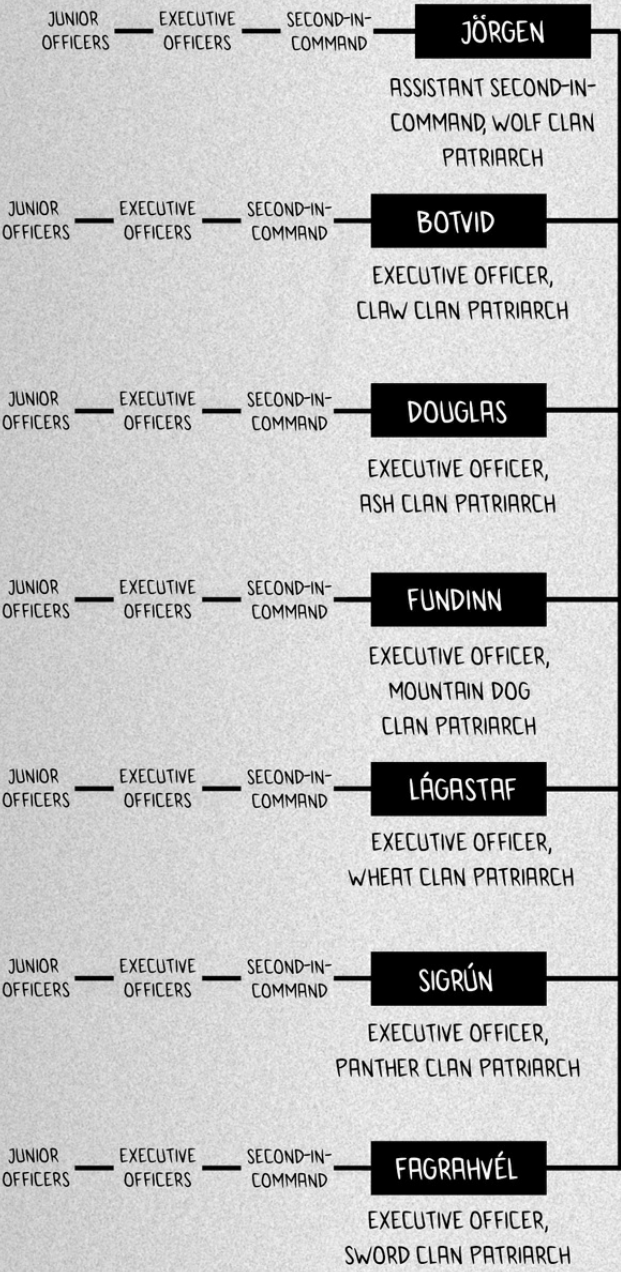
ACT 5

EPILOGUE

AFTERWORD



HIERARCHY OF THE STEEL CLAN



Prologue

Even now, Yuuto could recall the day he was summoned to Yggdrasil as vividly as if it were yesterday. One moment he was in the middle of the mountains; the next, he was tossed into a peculiar space made of brick where he'd been at the mercy of a dozen or so Western-looking men, their swords thrust at his neck. Unable to make any sense of the situation he found himself in, he was quickly overwhelmed by a surge of fear and anxiety.

The days that followed could only be described as a veritable hell. Every meal he was served was horrid—completely incompatible with his modern Japanese palate. Even so, his hunger eventually won out and made him manage to force it down without throwing up, only for him to be assailed with severe stomach pain, vomiting, and diarrhea. Every day, he trembled with the very real fear that he might succumb to malnourishment. He couldn't trust anyone in this strange new world, yet he no longer had the strength to live independently. He didn't understand the language of the people around him, but he could tell from their scornful gazes and haughty sneers that he'd fallen far below their expectations.

Every day he'd cursed his fate, wondering why he had to suffer so. All he'd done was take a picture of a divine object in a shrine! He had resented the deity who'd doled out such a harsh and unfair punishment. Not a day had gone by that he didn't regret his foolish actions. But now, things were different. Now, he...

ACT 1

“Wha?! What was that just now?!”

Linnea, having felt the ground shaking beneath her, immediately halted her horse. The magnitude of the tremors gave the impression that something large had collapsed some distance away. Her immediate thought had been that they were the result of an earthquake, but something about them felt unusual. Despite being so far from the epicenter of the tremors, she could tell from their severity and prolonged duration that they weren't the product of any natural phenomenon. Only one possibility came to mind.

“Something's happened at Glaðsheimr,” Rasmus stated, his expression tense as he stopped his own horse beside her. Rasmus had been like a father to Linnea, and even though he'd stepped away from active duty and become the Steel Clan's Leader of Subordinates, he was still the person Linnea could trust and rely on the most.

“If I were to guess...Valaskjálf Palace itself has likely fallen,” Linnea replied worriedly.

“Pardon?! Then what of our Lord Reginarch?!” Rasmus responded with a horrified yelp, his eyes practically bugging out of his head as he whipped his horse around in Glaðsheimr's direction in a panic.

She could understand why he was reacting the way he was. He probably figured that the reason it had collapsed was that the damage caused by two earlier major earthquakes had finally taken its toll on the war-torn palace. That assumption was only natural. Valaskjálf Palace was abnormally huge, after all—large enough to house a small town within its walls. Rasmus, too, had seen its majesty with his own two eyes. The notion of a human leveling that gigantic structure in one fell swoop was truly unimaginable to him.

“I wouldn't worry about Father. He's the one who felled it, after all,” she replied calmly. Linnea was just seventeen, but despite her age, she was Yuuto's Second-in-Command—set to inherit authority over the Steel Clan if the worst

were to befall him. Naturally, she had known of his plan beforehand.

“Inconceivable! He couldn’t have used *that*, could he? But... No, even a trebuchet or the Flame Clan’s province destroyers couldn’t hope to do that much damage... How in the world...?” The color drained from Rasmus’s face as he murmured in disbelief. To him, trebuchets and giant swivel cannons were already unheard-of super weapons—practically the work of gods, meting out divine punishment. Even those two instruments could only reasonably down a section of a fortress wall, or perhaps a modest-sized building at most, however. Neither of them was able to bring about a collapse large enough to produce the kind of tremors they’d just felt. He probably couldn’t even begin to fathom what had happened in the Holy Capital.

“Father made use of gunpowder and fuses. By pairing the two, he was able to rig the palace’s support pillars to blow simultaneously and bring the entire building down, taking the Flame Clan invaders with it. That was Father’s plan all along,” Linnea explained to a bewildered Rasmus.

“I-I see... That certainly seems like it could work. What a bold strategy to choose though... I would never have considered something so outlandish,” Rasmus replied, equal parts worry and wonder underpinning his tone. He frowned as he pondered Linnea’s explanation, then nodded in admiration. The idea itself was rather simple in hindsight, but the critical thinking skills needed to put the various parts together in a way that allowed the plan to succeed were something else entirely.

To display another example of this phenomenon, one could consider the following. Even the youngest of Yggdrasillians could comprehend the fact that it was easier to move on dry, solid ground than on rain-soaked earth. However, no resident of Yggdrasil would have ever thought to apply that knowledge to horseback riding and come up with stirrups as a result. In defiance of Yggdrasil’s common wisdom, Yuuto connected those dots so simply time and time again, coming up with one innovation after another. “Unbelievable” was truly the only way to describe it. Despite the praise pouring in from those around him, Yuuto himself merely saw it as using the knowledge he already possessed—it was nothing so special in his eyes.

“Father told me that this plan of his was supposed to be a last-ditch effort and

that even attempting to pull it off was going to be quite risky.” Her hands balled up in fists as she attempted to suppress her uneasiness and maintain her composure. Yuuto had made the call to execute that plan, meaning the enemy had been relentless enough to drive them all the way to the palace. She was certain that Yuuto truly had his back up against the wall.

“Hrmph. This Nobunaga guy has already crushed Father in battle once before despite his brilliance as a commander, and now he has him on his knees yet again. Just what kind of monster is he?” Rasmus thought aloud.

“We need to get going. Father should be near the entrance of the escape route by now,” Linnea stated, making her preparations to move out.

If the collapse of the palace had actually brought an end to the conflict, then there would be cause for much celebration, but there was a strong possibility that the Flame Clan’s army was still alive and well. If that were the case, Linnea’s auxiliary army of ten thousand would be indispensable to the besieged Steel Clan remnants within the palace grounds. The more time they took to reach Yuuto, the more precariously his victory—and his very life, for that matter—hung in the balance. They didn’t have a moment to spare. More than anything, though, Linnea didn’t want to wait a single moment longer to ensure that Yuuto was safe and sound.

“Out of the frying pan and into the fire, huh?” Lying low on his stomach and observing his surroundings through binoculars, Yuuto grimaced as if in pain. He currently found himself deep within an expansive forest in the northwest region of Glaðsheimr. The city’s nobility had cultivated it to harvest wood, but it also housed the entrance to an escape route that led from the throne to the outskirts of the city.

“How are they still alive...?” Yuuto groaned under his breath as the restless soldiers of the Flame Clan came into his vision. He was keeping watch to ensure none of the remaining Flame Clan troops managed to sneak out of Glaðsheimr. He’d lured them in by feigning retreat; then he’d brought the entirety of Valaskjálf Palace down on them once they’d been fully ensnared in the trap. The plan after that had been to use fallen leaves to turn the whole garden into a sea of flame, swallowing them all up, but apparently, quite a few soldiers still

remained.

“What should we do, Father?” asked Felicia.

“Good question,” Yuuto responded, his brow furrowed. Right now just he and Felicia were on recon, but nearly three thousand of his men were on standby underground. That said, in a head-on clash they still had no chance of victory. Even if they fled, it would take a good deal of time just for his men to reach the surface, and there was no way they’d make it out without being spotted by the Flame Clan. If by some ugly twist of fate they ended up surrounded before they had time to prepare, the enemy could make short work of their entire unit. The crease in his brow deepened as he watched the Flame Clan Army take up positions on Glaðsheimr’s outskirts.

“Let’s just keep our eyes on them for now,” he sighed. The decision to do nothing was still a decision in the end. Luckily, they’d taken pains to disguise the underground entrance, so it wasn’t likely to be discovered. At least, not immediately.

According to the report from Kristina, it was highly likely that Nobunaga had been caught in the palace’s collapse. With the demise of their supreme commander, it would only be a matter of time before the Flame Clan’s chain of command fell into disarray. Even if by some terrible misfortune or astonishing intuition Nobunaga had managed to survive, Hveðrungr or Haugspori could take advantage of the chaos to dispatch him from afar, as planned. However, this was Nobunaga they were up against. He could very well still survive despite all the measures Yuuto had taken to ensure his demise, but that bridge would have to be crossed when he came to it. Linnea’s army of ten thousand was likely already nearby. Once he rendezvoused with them, he’d have the strength to fight once more. All he had to do now was wait.

Bang!

The sound of a gunshot rang out—deafeningly loud even amidst the clamor of the Flame Clan troops.

“Ungh!” Nobunaga let slip a cry of anguish as a sharp, searing pain raced along his back. It hadn’t been the first time he’d suffered a wound from an

arquebus, but he'd had the luck of the gods since birth. That was probably why he'd managed to get away with only leg wounds and minor grazes until now. This time, however, the bullet had struck his torso, and in a rather vital area for that matter.

"D-Daddy?! Daddy! Are you okay?!" Homura's muffled voice arose from within his embrace.

She was still alive, it seemed. "*Good,*" he thought as he expelled a genuine sigh of relief.

"G...Guhh...I'm...less than okay...it seems..." Nobunaga sputtered weakly.

"Those guys shot you?!" Homura yelled in a panic.

"Indeed... Through the back, it seems... H-Homura... A-Are you hurt anywhere...?" he asked her.

"I-I'm okay since you protected me. B-But, daddy, you..."

"Homura... As long as you are well, that's all that matters..."

He wasn't putting on a display of bravado, nor was he trying to save face in some way. At that moment, those were Nobunaga's honest feelings. Strangely enough, he had no regrets.

"Great Lord!"

"Hurry! Stop the bleeding!"

"I-I'll call for a healer right away!"

A throng of horses and men made a commotion over him after rushing to the scene. They would administer first aid shortly. However...

"*Curses... This is...a bit worse than the usual wound...*" Nobunaga cursed inwardly. Not only was he losing a large amount of blood, but his strength was beginning to leave his body as well. He was keenly aware that his vision was becoming hazy. Things weren't looking too good for him.

"S-Salk..." Nobunaga mumbled.

"I am here, My Lord," an elderly, white-haired man replied, answering his summons. He was the last living member of the Five Division Commanders and

had been in the Flame Clan's service for two generations now. As such, he was practically a walking encyclopedia when it came to the Flame Clan's history.

"I relinquish...command of the troops to you. Do not...let it get out that I was shot. Keep that knowledge...only to the ones present...at all costs," Nobunaga ordered Salk.

"It shall be done, My Lord."

"Good... See that it is—" Nobunaga's speech was suddenly seized by an urge to cough welling up from his insides. When he let it out, a red, sticky substance dyed the ground.

"It seems my devil's luck has finally run out," he thought to himself. Glancing at his flank, he grimaced. He should've been shot in the back, but there was no hole in his side. That meant only one thing: the bullet hadn't passed through—meaning it was still somewhere inside him. *"Is this really where I die? Here, of all places?"*

It was clear to him that the lead bullet was lodged in his abdomen. Chances were extremely high that it would fragment and disperse shrapnel, causing serious damage to his innards. The poisonous lead would also eventually spread through his body. For someone already suffering from a terminal illness, it spelled certain death.

"No! Absolutely not! I refuse to die here!" Nobunaga roared in his heart as if to defy the very laws of nature. Indeed, he couldn't perish here. Not when he was one step closer to cornering Suoh Yuuto. His goal was finally within reach. He absolutely would not let his chance slip away again. Yet despite his conviction, his consciousness continued to fade in the face of his growing pain and blood loss. He could sense that if he passed out here, he would never wake up.

"That man is my sworn enemy! He murdered Ran in cold blood! How can I let that deed go unpunished?! I must not forget Ran's final words! 'Bring the world under your rule,' he said to me!"

He managed to rouse his own fading consciousness by chiding himself. His immeasurable tenacity, surpassing anything any other mere mortal could possibly muster, was reminiscent of a god of war. Even so, his consciousness

continued to fizzle out as the seconds passed...

Images of his entire life up to now raced through his mind in rapid succession. It was the kaleidoscope of memories that flashed before one's eyes just before their demise.

Nobunaga was born on May 12, 1534, according to the traditional calendar. At the time, his father, Nobuhide, was an outstandingly busy man, as he was preoccupied with expanding his own forces and sphere of influence. As the eldest son, Nobunaga was separated from his mother Dota Gozen to be groomed as the next ruler of the Oda clan under the tutelage of four clan vassals. However, he was the son of a lord, and his tutors might as well have been complete strangers to him. He had always been under the impression that they were showing restraint when handling him, as though some sort of invisible line had been drawn between them. Although he would eventually come to be the golden child who conquered the whole of Japan, at the time, he was a mere boy who needed to be taught discipline and etiquette.

“Why do father and mother never come to see me?! Why don't they notice me?!”

He could still vividly recall the anger in his childish heart back then. Although Nobunaga himself didn't remember the incident, he'd been told that, at the tender age of three, he had bitten his wet nurse's nipple off. Perhaps that, too, had been an angry, desperate plea for the affection he'd been deprived of.

“Why must I follow in the footsteps of a father that won't give me the time of day?! I shall carve my own path in this world!”

Nobunaga was the Oda bloodline's eldest son, meaning he was born into becoming its next ruler. His tutors were breathing down his neck at every given moment. Each time they told him what to do or how to act, frustration gradually mounted within him. The rest, as they say, is history. He left a legacy of unconventional actions and eccentric behavior that caused the world over to label him as an idealist and a fool. Of course, one could see those as products of his own youth and naïveté, but perhaps it was also his heart crying out for people to see him for who he was and not simply as some Oda clan trinket. And

perhaps the reason he overlooked most of the disciplinary transgressions and defiance of orders of Ran's older brother, Mori Nagayoshi, was that he saw a younger version of himself in the man, and therefore understood his nature better than anyone else.

The turning point for Oda Nobunaga was during the battle for Kira and Ohama in the Mikawa Province—his inaugural engagement. Deliberately choosing a windy day to depart, he caught the enemy in a surprise attack while setting fire to their camp, earning him great military acclaim and praise from the clan's vassals as well as Nobuhide himself. It was then he learned that results were the key to getting acknowledged. However, the days and years that followed were vexingly short of opportunities to prove himself on the battlefield, meaning his burgeoning eccentricity only intensified by the day. He put himself through hellish training sessions day and night and equipped all his troops with ridiculously long spears to use in battle. In the end, though, everything he did was for the sole purpose of getting his mother, who only doted on her younger sons, and his father, who had strong ties to the government, to acknowledge his strength. But sadly, he was never again granted such a chance, as Nobuhide suddenly fell ill and passed away when Nobunaga was only eighteen.

“Why did you just up and die on me, father?! I still haven't shown you my true might!” Nobunaga had screamed, hurling the incense in his hand in rage at the mortuary tablet honoring his deceased dad. At that moment, he'd made a promise to himself. If his father was no longer here to see his achievements, he'd just have to roar loud enough for heaven to hear.

“Ha ha, I guess something like that did happen, didn't it? Thinking back, that must have been the start of it all,” Nobunaga mused to himself. At some point, wanting to rule heaven and earth had become the goal rather than the means, with his original goal of pleasing his mother and father lost within the annals of his memory. Of course, that had only been the start. He had to put an end to this world of conflict and chaos. He had to bring peace to his subjects. There was no one more fit to unify this “new Japan,” Yggdrasil, than Oda Nobunaga.

“As a man, how can my goal be anything less than the heavens?! I alone will be the ruler of this realm!”

That sense of duty and self-assurance were currently Nobunaga's lifelines tethering him to this world. Yet he couldn't deny that, buried deep within that strong conviction, his desire for affection remained. He had looked upon the son of his brother Nobuyuki warmly, accepting him as a member of the family even though Nobuyuki himself had twice gone against his orders. During the attack on Iga, he'd forgiven his foolish son Nobukatsu after a hellish reprimanding. And now he'd shielded Homura with his own body. Perhaps he was cruel and unreasonable toward his subordinates. Perhaps he was constantly asking them for the impossible. But when it came to family, Oda Nobunaga was soft to the point of weakness.

"Demon King of the Sixth Heaven though I may be, in the end, I am both a son and a father."

Though he may have come to this realization too late—or perhaps he was only able to feel this so strongly because he was in the throes of death—he mustered up his resolve once more.

"That, however, is precisely why I cannot die here!"

Deep within his fading consciousness, Nobunaga lit a fire in his own heart that resounded like a lion's roar. He couldn't die yet. He still had something he needed to accomplish. Even if he did pass on someday, he had to hold on to this mortal coil at least until *it* was done. Suddenly, from within total darkness, a beam of light shot out as if to show him the way. His vision hazy, he desperately reached out toward it. When he did, his vision was engulfed in bright white—

"D-Daddy!"

The light gave way to reveal the tearstained face of his beloved daughter.

"Hmph, looks like I used up one of my nine lives," Nobunaga said with a grin as he rose. His wounds were so severe that no one would have been surprised if he had perished—and even now, he was continuing to bleed. He was forced to acknowledge that the fact he was currently standing meant he did indeed have the devil's luck.

"D-Daddy! Y-You need to rest—"

"No need to worry. I won't die just yet," Nobunaga replied assuredly, placing

an unsteady hand on his daughter's head and stroking it as she wiped her reddened eyes.

"Not sure just how long I'll hang on for, though," he added in his heart.

He'd managed to cling to life through sheer willpower this time, but miracles didn't often happen twice in a row. He knew he didn't have much time left. Perhaps a month at most. Or maybe he wouldn't even make it through the night. He had to settle everything before then at all costs. He would hold nothing back.

"Their army doesn't seem rattled at all," Yuuto said as he frowned, biting his lip in frustration all the while. Nobunaga had to have been caught in the collapse of Valaskjálf Palace. They'd waited until the Flame Clan had made their way deep inside the palace to set off the explosives, so there was no doubt. Yet, no matter how much time had passed, the Flame Clan showed no signs of panic.

"Which means Nobunaga's still alive and well," Yuuto muttered in exasperation.

On the battlefield, the ramifications of the death of one's supreme commander could not be understated—especially when said supreme commander was a charismatic force of nature on the level of Oda Nobunaga. Truthfully, after the Honno-ji Temple incident, news of Nobunaga's demise had thrown the Oda clan into a fervent panic. Even Shibata Katsuie, upon attacking the Uesugi clan and destroying Uozu Castle, had ordered his entire army to retreat when he'd heard the announcement. However, even that was a mild reaction compared to that of the Shikoku forces led by Oda Nobukata and Niwa Nagahide, who'd scattered all over the place and couldn't make a single decent maneuver the instant they'd heard the news, despite already being perfectly positioned to assassinate Akechi Mitsuhide.

As for Takigawa Kazumasu leading the Kanto forces, the shock was enough to make him lose the Kozuke Province to the Hojo family, and once the Kai and Shinano Provinces revolted shortly afterward, he quickly lost the rest of his territory, one region after another. According to many accounts, even the Mori

family, who had been a thorn in Nobunaga's side from the Great Retaliation of China to the point in time when Hashiba Hideyoshi executed Akechi Mitsuhide, was said to have refused the order to retreat, instead opting to attack their retreating enemy from the back because they didn't believe it was over. If they had followed such an order, Hideyoshi would've been caught in a pincer attack, suffered a crushing defeat, and history would have greatly changed.

In other words, the shock of the Honno-ji Temple incident sent massive ripples across all of Japan. Back when Yuuto had been forced to retreat and false news of his own death had spread, the Wolf Clan, too, had fallen into absolute disarray, and they'd lost Gimlé in one fell swoop as a result, even though he'd put plans in place in case something happened to him.

Considering all that, the current Flame Clan army was calm and organized. While they may have been unraveled slightly by the palace's collapse and subsequent fire, the chain of command was intact, and no soldiers had yet turned tail. Yuuto begrudgingly had to admit there was no other conclusion: Oda Nobunaga had survived Yuuto's last-ditch, Hail Mary effort.

"So, this is what going up against a divine general from the Sengoku era is like. If I didn't know any better, I'd say he's actually immortal," Yuuto said with a dry laugh, accidentally letting slip a comment of weakness.

Typically, Yuuto was not the kind of person who believed in the occult. In fact, he preferred to purge coincidences and factors of luck from battle, as they couldn't be consistently relied upon. He was the type of leader who'd rather focus on pragmatic strategies and techniques solely designed to gain the upper hand. Nobunaga was cut from the same cloth. But this was the battlefield. Anything could happen, and often what did happen was beyond the scope of prediction. Looking back through history, Yuuto couldn't even count on one hand the number of times where Nobunaga had survived a situation he was supposed to have died in, and that was only even considering events Yuuto was aware of. He'd overcome every one of them to find himself where he was now—as the patriarch of the Flame Clan.

That so-called devil's luck of his (or was it divine luck?) could no longer be explained with logic. There was no other phrase more apt for Nobunaga than "favored by the gods."

Yuuto's honest feelings were "*What the hell do I do now?*" But as the Steel Clan Army's supreme commander, Yuuto couldn't just lie down and do nothing. He had to act.

"Kris." Hopelessly on edge, he spoke the Vindálfs's captain's name into his transceiver.

"Kris here. What do you need, Father?" she responded in an instant in her trademark stoic, unaffected tone. But that calmness was precisely what Yuuto needed to hear right now.

"Are Linnea and the others not here yet?" he inquired.

"I don't see them," she replied.

"Oh, okay." It was a concrete answer that left no room for doubt or debate.

Young as she was, Kristina was the daughter of the Claw Clan's patriarch Botvid, and as such had inherited his mastery of trickery and spycraft techniques, as well as his network of contacts. Naturally, she knew what information was most important to Yuuto. There was no question that if she had spotted Linnea's group approaching, he would be the first to know, and since she hadn't contacted him, it meant they hadn't arrived yet. It was the anxiety and impatience within him that made him ask regardless.

"Heh. By the way, with that fight in the north earlier and now this, you sure have been taking some risky gambles lately, Father."

"Not like I had a choice." Yuuto met Kristina's teasing with a curt reply.

He knew exactly what she was getting at. Getting surrounded by the Flame Clan at Glaðsheimr had been rough, and he'd been practically unable to make contact with the outside. He knew the Flame Clan unit in the west led by Shiba had been eliminated, and that Linnea and the others were headed toward Glaðsheimr, but beyond that, he was completely in the dark. Similarly, Linnea likely also wasn't privy to the details of what had happened to Yuuto within Glaðsheimr. He had counted on Linnea pinpointing his location at the entrance to the shortcut in the forest and rushing to his aid. Truthfully, even he thought it'd been a hideously risky bet. Combined with waiting for Sigrún in the battle in the north, Yuuto had, as of late, been taking actions that didn't gel at all with his

usually calculated nature. His back had been so against the wall that he'd been forced to rely on desperate gambles. Although—

“I don't doubt for a second that they'll show up. I only wish they'd come here sooner, ha ha,” Yuuto added somewhat awkwardly.

“I'm well aware of Big Sister Linnea's capabilities, but you had even less information at your disposal than you did with Big Sister Rún,” Kristina replied.

“Even still, I believe she'll pull through. I know her.”

No one was more aware of Linnea's talent than Yuuto himself. Her secretarial capabilities were, in this era, second to none. Back when they were in the Wolf Clan, Jörgen had served Yuuto faithfully and skillfully, but Linnea's skill dwarfed even that of Jörgen's. She had a knack for always drawing the correct conclusion from the information she was given.

“...Ah! They're here! Steel Clan flag spotted in the northwest!”

“Yes! I knew she'd come!” Yuuto gripped his fist tightly. He couldn't deny they were outnumbered, but combined with her forces, they would be able to turn the tables.

“All right, let's move! All units, head outside from underground as soon as...”

“W-Wait, Father! N-Nobunaga is...”

An unpleasant nervousness assaulted him as soon as he heard that name. “*So, he was alive after all...*”

Yuuto's forces weren't even prepared to stage a counterattack yet, and Nobunaga had already made his next move. Unable to hold it back, he gulped nervously.

“Nobunaga is...flying the white flag of his own volition! He's surrendering!”

ACT 2

“He’s...surrendering?!”

For a moment, Yuuto didn’t fully comprehend what he was hearing. He was sure he’d imagined it. He repeated the words several times in his head, and sure enough, there was no way to misinterpret them as anything else.

“Yes. Nobunaga is currently located near Glaðsheimr’s west gate. He’s strolling toward us accompanied by a small number of attendants and flying the flag of surrender!”

“No way...” Yuuto’s utterance under his breath came out like a groan. This behavior was decidedly unlike the cautious Nobunaga.

“I am almost certain this is some sort of trap,” Kristina offered. By all accounts, she was probably right. Yuuto recalled the battles of Xiang Yu and Liu Bang during the Chu-Han Contention. Yu, who’d led the Chu side, and Bang, who’d led the Han side, came to a stalemate and agreed to a truce, but Bang quickly broke that agreement, cruelly attacking Yu as he and his men retreated and ultimately clinching the hegemony of China. Yuuto first assumed that this was a tactic to lure him into a similar false sense of security, but...

“This is probably different,” Yuuto decided, shaking his head to emphasize that thought. Yes, Nobunaga could sometimes be as volatile as he was careful, but—

“He’s at a greater risk of being shot at again than I am to be lured. There’s no way he doesn’t know that,” he continued.

He couldn’t know for sure, but he figured that Hveðrungr or Haugspori had already made their move. There was no way Nobunaga wouldn’t be on guard for another attack.

“Also, right now he has no need to make himself a decoy in order to lure me in.”

“I suppose...” After a period of pensive silence, Kristina seemed to also notice

how unusual the situation was. Apart from the casualties, the Flame Clan had the advantage when one looked at the overall battle situation. The palace had fallen, the Steel Clan forces had been cleansed from the Holy Capital, and Yuuto was practically in the palm of Nobunaga's hand. Just looking at the results, it was an overwhelming victory for the Flame Clan.

There was little room for doubt. Yggdrasil was practically Nobunaga's to rule.

Of course, in order to prevent any future insurrections, Yuuto's capture was necessary, but Nobunaga certainly wouldn't put himself in jeopardy for a simple deception ploy at this point. If he were that desperate, it'd have just meant he was afraid of Yuuto, and if that were true, then ruling the heavens and earth was practically a pipe dream for him. There was no way that someone with as much pride as Oda Nobunaga would agree to such a tactic. Taking an action like that would only make him appear less intimidating and would have huge negative consequences for the future management of the nation. It would be a prime example of putting the cart before the horse.

"Looking at it from the opposite angle, that means Nobunaga has some other reason for this. Something significant enough to necessitate surrender while knowing full well the dangers of doing so."

"Makes sense, but what could he possibly be planning...?" Kristina asked.

"Heck if I know. If I had the answer to that, we wouldn't be in such trouble," Yuuto replied and shrugged in resignation. This came as a complete shock. He was unable to come up with a coherent response at that moment. Could it be that Nobunaga actually had been so heavily wounded in the collapse and by the sniper attack that he really did intend to surrender? Did he want to avoid being hunted down by the Steel Clan? No, if that were the case, then Nobunaga wouldn't be moving toward him so nonchalantly. To begin with, it'd be pointless to give up the Holy Capital after going so far to make it his.

"So, what should we do?"

"Good question." Yuuto sighed deeply and looked up at the sky. The possibility that it was a trap was slim. To begin with, Yuuto had no interest in the unification of Yggdrasil. Until he was able to escape, he was fine leaving it just the way it was. And he didn't want to create any more casualties. If the

other side was willing to surrender, he'd readily welcome it.

"We'll accept his surrender."

He had no other option.

An arrow whooshed toward them from seemingly nowhere, stabbing into the ground with a *thunk*.

"What in blazes?!"

"Master, stand down! It's dangerous!" Nobunaga's retinue of bodyguards snapped into action, suddenly bloodthirsty as they surveyed the area.

Nobunaga gave a small, exasperated smile, and waved his hand for them to cease. "Calm down, men. It's just a letter." He gestured toward the arrow, which had a piece of paper tied to it. One of his retinue picked up the arrow, unrolled the paper, and handed it to Nobunaga. On it was just one sentence: "We accept your surrender."

"Hmph. Well, everything so far has been within my expectations."

He had long since seen through Yuuto's motive of trying to buy time by stalling the Flame Clan Army. He knew that his surrender was what Yuuto wanted more than anything else right now. The real battle would be from this point forward.

"Homura." Nobunaga addressed his prized daughter, who was standing in front of him as if to protect him. There was no response. She was apparently so focused on scanning the area for hostiles that his voice hadn't reached her ears. She reminded him of a wildcat with its fur standing on end.

"Good grief." Nobunaga scratched his head vexingly. "Homura, are you listening? HOMURA!"

"Hya!" His charged voice brought Homura back to her senses as she let out a yelp of surprise.

"Do not be so on guard you lose the ability to react when you need to, my daughter."

"Oh... Um... Okay, daddy..." She was apparently aware of her mistake, as she

dropped her head bashfully. Nobunaga wished she was more composed at times like this. If she had been calmer, she would've realized that the earlier arrow was never fired with the intent of killing Nobunaga. She was strong, sure, but still far from reliable. Though, since she was still only ten and had just witnessed her father being shot in front of her, perhaps her mistake was to be expected.

"Have you pinpointed the location of the one who shot the arrow?" he asked.

"Eh? Ah, yes, daddy. It came from over there. About six hundred paces away, I think. The archer is good at erasing his presence. If I hadn't been paying attention, I would've lost him too."

"I see." Nobunaga couldn't stop his eyes from widening. One of Homura's talents as an Einherjar was the ability to sense nearby signs of life. That power of hers was scarily accurate—in fact, the reason the Steel Clan's self-destructive retreat tactic fell by the wayside was entirely due to her. The fact that even she almost failed to nail down the enemy archer's location spoke volumes for their ability.

"The enemy is just as skilled as expected, it seems," Nobunaga stated.

"What should we do, daddy? To be honest, I want to hunt down and kill that archer, but you don't want me to do that, do you?"

"No, I do not." Nobunaga met Homura's upturned eyes with a curt reply. Such an action would nullify the Flame Clan's intent to surrender. That was something he wanted to avoid at all costs. "Let them be. We do not intend to harm our opponent."

"Not even if things get ugly?" Homura responded to Nobunaga's intercession with pursed lips and puffed-up cheeks. The earlier arrow message had apparently been quite traumatic for her.

"Ha ha. Even in the worst-case scenario, I have you to protect me, my daughter. For one as skilled as you, that should be a cinch, no?"

"Of course, daddy! Leave it to me!" Nobunaga's words seemed to have cheered her up as she pounded her chest with confidence.

"She's still a kid after all."

Nobunaga looked upon that display of bravado with extreme fondness. He wanted her to have a happy future.

“Mittsu!”

“Yes, My Lord!”

When Nobunaga called his name, one of his retinue—a young lad—ran to his side and replied. Mittsu was well-built and muscular to begin with, but the muscles in his right arm bulged especially conspicuously. That made sense, considering he was the strongest archer the Flame Clan had. That right arm of his spoke to the years of practice he’d spent honing his craft.

“Just as we discussed, can you fire six hundred paces in that direction?”

“With ease, My Lord.” Mittsu gave a confident nod.

In this era, six hundred paces to a grown adult was akin to approximately four hundred twenty meters in the modern age. The Flame Clan’s bows fired from an effective range of approximately two hundred meters, with the maximum possible range being about four hundred meters. For a messenger arrow to reach beyond that while compensating for the arrow’s weight and resistance to the air required an almost superhuman show of skill, yet his reply was immediate.

“Hah!” With a cry of strength, Mittsu fired the arrow. They’d already expected the Steel Clan to comply, so the message had already been written ahead of time. It read:

Let us meet as fellow supreme commanders so we may have a heart-to-heart.

It clearly sounded like a trap, and there was a strong possibility it would be taken as such. But Nobunaga was running out of time. He had no choice but to reach for the last thread of hope he had left.

“‘Let us meet as fellow supreme commanders so we may have a heart-to-heart,’ huh?” Yuuto repeated the words Kristina had relayed to him. Not too long ago, he’d been struggling in a life-or-death battle against the forces of the man now asking for peace. This sudden call for negotiations, not via letters or messengers but face-to-face as respective leaders, couldn’t have been more

dubious. It was typically the losers of a battle that had to beg for their lives; he'd never heard of a situation where the side with the upper hand had surrendered.

"Well, they do keep falling for our tricks. It'd only be natural for them to think we still have the advantage." His hand on his chin, Yuuto was deep in thought. Sure, there was nothing particularly strange about that line of thinking, but something about this whole situation just didn't add up. Nobunaga had been on the receiving end of Yuuto's unusual tactics several times now, so he knew Nobunaga wasn't the type to back down. If anything, it was quite the contrary—he was the kind of person to take control of the situation and bend it to his will.

"Big Brother, I feel that this is too dangerous," Felicia advised worriedly. He understood what she meant. Honestly, he'd have been lying if he'd said he wasn't afraid. In fact, if he threw in the towel and escaped right now, he'd probably be able to see Mitsuki and his children again.

"No, I'm going. Tell them I accept their invitation, Kris," Yuuto replied.

Yuuto knew full well the danger. He didn't want to die. On the contrary, he would do whatever it took to live. But sacrificing the brave warriors fighting for him wasn't an option. Not when he'd been the one to order them to fight in the first place. After coming this far, he would not abandon his responsibility by ensuring only his own survival. He wanted as many of his men as possible to make it through this. That was his duty as a supreme commander.

"Understood," said Kristina's quiet voice through the transceiver, but then he heard her sigh. Kristina almost never let emotion show in her voice, but after spending four years around her, Yuuto could tell that she was beside herself with worry.

"I've been with you long enough to know how obstinate you can be at times like this," Felicia chimed in.

"Ow, harsh." Yuuto reflexively grimaced, but he couldn't deny the truth of what she'd said, so he didn't argue. "Sorry you're always having to deal with me."

"Oh, I'm used to it by now. Of course, I'll be coming along with you. It's my duty to protect my big brother, after all."

“Huh?! But you...” Yuuto unconsciously glanced at Felicia’s stomach. She had slender, beautiful hips, so he couldn’t really tell, but according to her, she was bearing Yuuto’s child. Nobunaga had his own honor to uphold in this world he hoped to rule, so Yuuto might be able to return home alive, but that was pure conjecture, not a given.

In fact, back in Nobunaga’s youth, when his younger brother Nobuyuki had staged a rebellion against him, he’d feigned illness to lure his brother in and then assassinated him. While that had been a completely different situation, the fact that he’d done something so callous made Yuuto’s judgment of Nobunaga’s integrity waver. Nobunaga also gave in to his emotions easily, and since Yuuto had now put down several veteran Flame Clan warriors, there was no way he wouldn’t harbor a grudge. He absolutely could not take the woman bearing his child to a battlefield like that.

“I promised Big Sister Mitsuki that I would bring you back home safe and sound, Big Brother. I won’t go back on my word!” Her eyes shone with indomitable will as she looked Yuuto directly in the face. At times like these, she could be just as obstinate as Yuuto, but despite her conviction, he still felt major trepidation in taking her along. As he remained at a loss, wondering what to do...

“What if I go with you as well? Then there’ll be no problem, right?” A dignified voice came from behind him. He turned around to see Sigrún, her hair fluttering in the wind.

“Rún! Are you okay now?!” Yuuto, surprised by Sigrún’s sudden appearance, couldn’t help but blurt out.

“Yes. I do apologize for leaving you in such a desperate situation. There could be no greater shame for a warrior such as I.” Sigrún furrowed her brow as she bowed her head in apparent sorrow. After she’d fought one fierce battle after another, and after having spent every last ounce of her stamina, she’d finally passed out following her encounter with Homura. “But thanks to the rest you allowed me, I’ve recovered most of my strength. I believe I shall be of use to you once more.” Her tone was as matter-of-fact as always, but she couldn’t fool Yuuto’s eyes. Her knees were quivering ever so slightly. She’d already entered the Realm of Godspeed twice today. Even a single use of that ability resulted in

severe muscle pain that left the user unable to move afterward. A few hours of rest would hardly be enough to recover from its effects.

“Is that so?” Felicia seemed to notice as well, because she approached Sigrún, grabbed her right arm, and yanked it forward while pushing down on Sigrún’s left shoulder with her other hand. Sigrún’s posture immediately crumbled. She then swept Sigrún’s feet from underneath her in a fluid motion using the judo technique known as a sweeping leg throw, sending Sigrún to the ground with ease.

“Are you suggesting you’re battle-ready in that sorry state?” Felicia’s tone was icy as she glared down at Sigrún on the ground.

Sigrún scowled, biting her lip in frustration. Normally, she could have handled any sort of surprise attack with aplomb and would never have made a mistake like leaving her dominant arm open to her foe. Under any other circumstance, Felicia would’ve been the one to end up on the ground—that was just how wide the gap in skill was between the two women. Yet Sigrún had been the one to fall, and she still hadn’t made a move to stand even now. No, it wasn’t that she hadn’t tried to stand, it was that she *couldn’t*. She was utterly drained.

“Perhaps if you’d come at me with the intent to kill, the outcome would’ve been different,” Sigrún spat stubbornly, still collapsed on the ground. She seemed to be implying that in that instance she’d have entered the Realm of Godspeed to clinch the victory.

“I don’t think so, Rún. You’re not coming with us, and that’s final.” Yuuto stepped in and made the decisive call—he couldn’t allow her to wear herself down any more than she already had. Perhaps an ability that allowed her to stretch beyond her limits would let her fight alongside them even in her current state, but Yuuto was worried that a third use of Realm of Godspeed might cause serious, permanent damage to her body.

“What?! But, Father...!” Sigrún protested.

“As you are right now, you can’t even use your right arm properly. If you continue on in this state, you might even lose the ability to walk on your own. I can’t in good faith let you do that to yourself.”

“I am both your sword and your shield, Father. Even if all four of my limbs

break beyond repair while protecting you, I shall have no regrets.”

“Still not happening. You stay here and rest—that’s an order.”

“But—!”

“No means no, Rún.”

“Mmmgh!”

Despite Sigrún’s stubbornness, Yuuto refused to change his mind. Sigrún was always loyal to Yuuto, to the point where if Yuuto said the sky was green, she would proudly also proclaim that it was green. With Yuuto’s position made clear, even the strong-willed Sigrún had to concede with a sigh.

“...I understand, Father. But Felicia, I am also vehemently opposed to you going in my stead. You are carrying Father’s child, are you not?”

“I’m surprised you noticed.”

“The shape of your body has changed, and you smell different. From just that alone, I can tell.”

“That so? But I’ll be fine, Rún. I can still move my body without issue. At least, better than you can.”

“And what will you do if the worst occurs?!”

“Isn’t Big Brother’s safety more important right now than what-ifs?!”

The two raised their voices as they glared at each other. Verbal sparring was nothing new for the pair, but the aura radiating from them this time was different than usual. Perhaps it was because the situation was desperate. They were practically at each other’s throats.

“Hey, you tw—”

“Heh heh, aaaren’t you forgetting someone?”

Just when Yuuto was about to step in, a voice brimming with confidence came from behind him. He turned around to see a girl with red hair done up in pigtails.

“Hildegard!”

“At your service!” She replied immediately when Yuuto called her name. She was like a little sister to Sigrún, as well as her beloved protégé. She possessed a wealth of natural talent as the Einherjar who bore the rune Úlfhéðinn, the Wolfskin, but lately her growth had been even more rapid. She’d taken down one of the Flame Clan’s Five Blades, Ryusai, and rescued an incapacitated Sigrún in the nick of time, bringing her to safety. She was even able to go toe-to-toe with Homura, a twin-runed Einherjar, pretending to duel her to the death while in actuality buying invaluable time to escape. Put simply, her exploits as of late had been indispensable to the Steel Clan’s survival.

“Right, can’t forget about you,” Yuuto nodded in agreement. Come to think of it, her battle capabilities and wolf-like ability to sense danger through sound and smell made her incredibly well-suited to the task at hand. Honestly, how had he not considered her before now?

“That’s right! Just leave it to your girl Hildegard!” She pounded her chest with confidence, but somehow that made her seem less reliable. “*Oh yeah, that’s why,*” Yuuto thought to himself. Her words and actions were often reminiscent of a small, harmless animal.

“Why are you always like this, Rún?!”

“I daresay I could ask you the same, Felicia!”

“Hey, is anyone even listening?!” Felicia and Sigrún continued their argument, completely ignoring Hildegard. It was like she didn’t even register within either of their consciousnesses. Such was par for the course for Hildegard, a girl born under an unlucky star.

“Please be careful, Big Brother. I mean it.”

“It’ll be fine. They agreed to all of our demands, so there’s nothing to worry about.” Yuuto shrugged his shoulders and grinned reassuringly at a worried Felicia. The Flame Clan had accepted the conditions the Steel Clan had since laid down for the meeting with Nobunaga, and everything was going smoothly. They’d been able to get him to concede on the meeting point being a place far away from the Flame Clan’s main command post, managed to restrict Nobunaga’s retinue to only a small number of troops, and ensured that Homura

would be absent during the negotiations. In fact, it was almost going *too* smoothly—something was strange about having so many of those demands accepted, since they clearly gave the Steel Clan the upper hand.

Sigrún, who stood beside Yuuto, let out a heavy sigh. “Honestly, Hilda, the fact that you’ll be the only one with him has me worried...” She reminded Yuuto of a mother sending her child off to their first day of elementary school. In actuality, that wasn’t too far off the mark.

“Oh come on, Big Sis Rún! Can’t you see me off with a happier look on your face?” Hildegard pursed her lips in dissatisfaction. Being completely ignored earlier had likely soured her mood. “I’m better than I used to be, honest! You must’ve heard how I single-handedly dispatched one of the Five Blades! When will you start seeing me as a full-fledged warrior already?!”

“I do acknowledge your strength. More than anyone else here, in fact. In your fully awakened beast mode, I’m not sure even I could win against you.”

“R-Really?! You’d praise me that much?!” Hildegard was suddenly beside herself with glee. If she’d had a tail, Yuuto had no doubt that it would be wagging furiously right now. That reminded him of how Sigrún used to be back in the day, and he couldn’t help but let out a chuckle.

“See, that’s why she’s worried. You let things like that go to your head too easily,” said Yuuto.

“What, you mean she was lying?!”

“I wasn’t necessarily lying to you,” Sigrún explained. “You’re plenty strong, and your excellent sense of sound and smell are perfectly suited for this task. The problem is that you often get full of yourself when things are going your way and end up letting your guard down.” Sigrún frowned in worry, just like a mother would. This operation would determine whether Yuuto, Sigrún’s sworn father, survived, so of course she was worried, but Hildegard was too preoccupied to realize.

“I’m not a child anymore, Big Sis Rún! How about putting some faith in me?!”

“Well, I suppose you’re right about that. Anyway, be sure to keep yourself in check! Understood?”

“Big Sis, saying stuff like that to me is only gonna have the opposite effect! In fact, the old me would probably be getting mad and losing her cool right about now!”

“Hmm, is that so?”

“Yeah. Of course. I’m way calmer than I used to be, though, so I can just laugh off something like that now!” Hildegard gave a wry smile as if to say “Sorry, this is just how I am.” In truth, it was the type of relaxed, natural smile that showed how at peace with herself she’d become. Yuuto knew that feeling well—the feeling of successfully accomplishing something and having the confidence boost that came with it become a pillar in your heart, supporting you. For Yuuto, that was his experience of smelting steel.

For Hildegard, it was most likely defeating Ryusai. A number of times now she had let her chances of gaining acclaim on the battlefield slip through her fingers, and she’d been quite desperate to make up for those shortcomings. Her newfound calmness was probably a result of having that worry dissolved.

“Hm.” Sigrún seemed to have picked up on it too, as her expression changed. Moments after, an overwhelmingly murderous aura began to emanate from her body. It was the type of sharp, cold, and heavy killing intent only a first-rate warrior like Sigrún could produce, despite her currently barely being able to stand. Its intensity made Yuuto swallow nervously. Even without feeling its full brunt, a regular rank-and-file soldier might’ve turned tail. Being right in front of Sigrún, the pressure Hildegard was feeling right now likely couldn’t even compare.

“Sooo, guess that means I pass?” Yet Hildegard’s reply was cool and composed. She, too, was a seasoned warrior. There was no way she didn’t pick up on the aura Sigrún was radiating. She immediately sensed that Sigrún wasn’t serious and deflected that intimidating aura with the strength of her own will. It was something only someone who truly was at peace with themselves could accomplish. The old Hildegard would’ve cowered and run away for certain.

“Hmph.” Sigrún snorted derisively, but the fact that she did not chide Hildegard any further implied tacit acknowledgment. Hildegard must’ve understood that as well, judging by the smug grin on her face. Yuuto could

plainly see the deep bond the two of them shared as teacher and pupil from how in sync they were. They probably would've denied it had he called attention to it, though.

"Well, let's head out then, Hildegard." Sensing the farewells were over, Yuuto called Hildegard over. Her and Sigrún's exchange had moved him, but nevertheless, it was time to switch gears. The time had finally come to end the long battle against Nobunaga and the Flame Clan.

"So, you're finally here." Nobunaga smirked when he saw the black-haired boy approach. Was it his imagination, or had he gotten a bit taller in the year or so since he saw him last? That aside, the most striking change was the expression on the boy's face.

"Long time no see."

"Oh yes, it has been a while indeed. Almost too long to keep an old man waiting."

"Or maybe you just need to learn by example and take it easy," Yuuto replied with a shrug.

Of course, Nobunaga knew Yuuto wasn't going to let his guard down around him, but he seemed a lot less nervous than before. Back when Yuuto and Nobunaga had first met in the village of Stórk, Yuuto had impressed Nobunaga with ambition that belied his youth, but he'd also seemed a bit stiff. Here, though, he looked almost haggard with fatigue, yet his eyes burned with an intense will that now felt complete to Nobunaga. Just from a glance, it was clear he'd grown over the past year. He'd become strong enough to put up a fight despite Nobunaga having three times as many troops. He was now someone Nobunaga could rely on.

"Come, let us have a seat." Nobunaga entered the bowery, where two seats had already been prepared, and sat down with a thump. The location of their meeting was a recreational area on the outskirts of Glaðsheimr that a previous þjóðann had built several generations ago so they could hunt for sport. The bowery was on top of a hill, where an open view with no trees spread out before them—in other words, any lurking mercenaries and soldiers would be in

plain sight.

“Sure.” Yuuto nodded and sat opposite Nobunaga. Their bodyguards took up positions on their respective sides outside the bowery. This was a one-on-one meeting between the two men capable of ruling all of Yggdrasil. Involving anyone else at this point would just be cumbersome.

“First, let me express my thanks for agreeing to my cease-fire. Of course, victory would certainly have been mine if this war had gone on much longer anyway,” he said, a smug grin on his face as he delivered the first attack. Nobunaga’s first verbal salvo was intended to keep Yuuto’s ego in check. Nobunaga had swallowed many of the Steel Clan’s demands up to this point in order to get him here, but there was no longer any need to hold back. He would say everything on his mind without hesitation.

As far as Nobunaga was concerned, this war was won, and that victory belonged to the Flame Clan. Nothing Yuuto could say to him would change his mind about that.

“Surely you must be joking. Most of my forces were still in reserve. Forces you didn’t even know about.” Yuuto responded with a sly grin, as if to say he still had tricks up his sleeve.

“Oh? It looked to me like the lion’s share of your troops had already been scattered to the winds!”

“Surely you of all people would have realized that that was part of our trap?”

“Hmph.” Nobunaga rested his cheek in the palm of his hand as if unamused.

Indeed, they had been completely ensnared in that trap. That rout had been the real thing, but that was precisely why he hadn’t seen through the ruse. Thanks to that, they’d been led by the nose straight into the heart of the palace and gotten caught in the rubble of the collapse. If Homura hadn’t been there, Yuuto would likely have won this war then and there. Or so one would think, except—

“I still have fifty thousand of my finest men at my disposal. Shouldn’t you have only several thousand on your side at most now?” Nobunaga inquired.

“Not necessarily.” Yuuto replied with a sly grin.

“I take it you mean the forces in the west? But that should only be ten thousand or so, no?”

“No, you’re correct, but we can manage fifty thousand.”

“Do you take me for a fool?” Nobunaga spat, but then smiled wryly. He already knew those words weren’t just talk. That had been proven in the last battle. Against the Flame Clan Army’s hundred thousand, the Steel Clan’s thirty thousand had held the advantage the entire time. They had been a painful thorn in Nobunaga’s side the whole time. True, with Valaskjálf Palace reduced to rubble, the Flame Clan’s victory was all but assured. However, the Flame Clan had likely suffered over ten times more casualties than the Steel Clan. Nobunaga lost as a commander the moment he’d failed to realize holing up in a castle was most advantageous for the ones on the defensive. Even from a tactical perspective, Yuuto had won—his focus from the start had not been defending Glaðsheimr, but delivering a huge blow to the Flame Clan by preventing their advance to Jötunheimr, and he’d accomplished just that.

In truth, Nobunaga had lost over half his men, and he himself was injured gravely. The Flame Clan could no longer continue its advance, meaning Yuuto had succeeded. Against the great Oda Nobunaga, no less. Nobunaga had no choice but to acknowledge Yuuto’s strength.

“You know, back in the day, in my quest to unify Japan under my rule, there was a man I wanted to avoid conflict with at all costs.” Nobunaga cast a furtive glance at the landscape outside as he fondly reminisced on the past. Yuuto gave a knowing nod.

“Takeda Shingen, right?”

“Indeed. He had many more men than I, thousands more. Not that I’d intended to lose if we did cross paths, but he was the type of opponent I wouldn’t come out unscathed from. To prevent him from exploiting any gaps in my defenses, I continued to butter him up, currying his favor.”

Nobunaga adopted his niece as his own daughter and married her off to Shingen’s son Katsuyori, then he made Shingen’s fifth daughter his son Nobutada’s legal wife to strengthen his connections to Shingen. He frequently sent his in-laws gifts, and he always ensured they were of the utmost quality.

When, as an experiment, Shingen decided to shave down some lacquerware that had been nothing more than a mere accessory to one of his gifts, he discovered that the paint had been double and triple-layered, showing how valuable the item had been. After seeing the item's quality for himself, Shingen had no choice but to acknowledge Nobunaga's sincerity. Nobunaga recalled that episode fondly.

After his death, Nobunaga was often called an arrogant individual who didn't even fear God in heaven, but the truth was he was as flexible as his goals required, not hesitating to bow his head and beg pardon when the situation called for it. Heaven and earth weren't so easy to rule that you could do so with brute force alone. That flexibility mixed with inherent toughness was where Nobunaga's true strength lay.

"Have pride, Suoh Yuuto. There are only two people in this world I'd rather avoid fighting. You are the second." Nobunaga exhaled through his nostrils as if bored. With the stronghold of Glāðsheimr no longer impregnable, he had no reason to think he could lose. But another fight with Yuuto would mean many more casualties. He was certain of it. Yuuto was an accomplished enough warrior to *make* him certain of it.

He was despicable, and at the same time, *reliable*.

"That is why it has to be you. You are the only man I can entrust my daughter Homura to."

"What are you saying...?" Yuuto asked with trepidation, his brow knit in confusion. Honestly, this had come out of nowhere. Sure, Nobunaga had talked about it once before during the Stórk conference, but things back then had been completely different.

"I mean exactly what I said. Since time immemorial, when forming an alliance, has it not been commonplace to deepen the bonds between two parties through marriage?" Nobunaga's lips twisted up into a grin that Yuuto couldn't see as anything but mischievous. He was clearly proposing this, well aware of how dubious Yuuto found it. Indeed, it was common everywhere for alliances to be set in stone by marrying off their sons or daughters to each other. But that only applied if Homura was a normal girl—not a powerful twin-runed Einherjar.

“Are you telling me that Homura is cheap enough in your eyes to be used as a bargaining chip? I highly doubt that.”

Homura was the strongest member of the Flame Clan—no, she was most probably the strongest person in all of Yggdrasil currently. Yuuto knew firsthand how terrifying her power had been in the last battle they’d fought. Considering how her strength also invigorated the other Flame Clan troops, one could even say Homura was a trump card whose mere presence was equal to fielding an additional twenty thousand or so men. Yuuto could not see a plausible reason why Nobunaga would want to let her go. Was it a ploy to assassinate Yuuto? If so, there was no need to beat around the bush like this. Was it a plot to infiltrate and take over the Steel Clan from the inside? Not when the Flame Clan already had the advantage. In fact, they could usurp the Steel Clan this instant through sheer numbers if they so desired. He couldn’t get a read on Nobunaga’s true intentions at all.

“Hmph. Well, we won’t get anywhere by continuing to pull the wool over each other’s eyes. Look.” Nobunaga gripped his tunic and cast it off, disrobing in an instant. On his bare abdomen, Yuuto saw a severe and painful-looking wound dressed with cotton. “As you can see, I have a hole in my stomach here. That masked man of yours shot me.”

“Masked man...? Oh, Brother Rungr! I see!” Yuuto reflexively expelled a breath of relief. He hadn’t heard from Hveðrungr over the transceiver for a while now, so he’d been worried, but it seemed Hveðrungr had fulfilled his duty as a sniper despite the lack of communication.

“Somehow, I managed to crawl back from the abyss of death, but even so, odds are that I have little more than a month left,” Nobunaga said casually. So casually, in fact, that Yuuto felt something was off. Would Nobunaga, who had overcome countless tribulations through his tremendous innate vitality, really give up so easily?

“I wasn’t aware that the great Nobunaga was such a weakling,” said Yuuto.

“Perish the thought. I could easily manage with a wound of this caliber under normal circumstances. However, this body of mine has already been afflicted with a terminal illness.”

Yuuto's eyes went wide with surprise. He watched Nobunaga's face, trying to ascertain if he was telling the truth. Yuuto had assumed that Nobunaga's haggard complexion was merely due to mental exhaustion from the prolonged war, but truthfully, he did look worse for wear even when accounting for that. The ambition radiating from him was usually strong enough to crush any of his opponents underfoot should they let their guard down, but that typically suffocating aura of his now felt more like a light breeze. Perhaps that was due to Yuuto's growth as a leader, or perhaps...

"I haven't succumbed yet because Homura's power is keeping the illness at bay, but every day my condition worsens."

Yuuto found himself unable to respond. He continued to listen to what Nobunaga had to say.

"That's why I can tell. I have managed to hang on through sheer force of will up until now, but I don't have much longer." Nobunaga spoke nonchalantly, as though he were talking about someone else. Historically, those in positions of power became more interested in immortality and longevity as their accomplishments continued to rack up, but Nobunaga held fast to the belief that humans are all meant to die someday. It was short, to the point, and simple to understand—very Nobunaga-like, Yuuto mused.

"As one who has taken several of my favorite retainers from me, you are my sworn enemy, Suoh Yuuto. I would love nothing more than to spend the remainder of my dwindling life on revenge, but..." Nobunaga glared at Yuuto with half-lidded eyes. Suddenly, the aura surrounding him became icy—sharp enough to cut like a blade. The retinue of Steel Clan bodyguards standing nearby tensed up in unison. However, it lasted only an instant, the murderous intent enveloping Nobunaga dispersing as quickly as it appeared.

"I've weighed my options, and I'll say it once again: I've decided you are the only one fit to entrust Homura to. Truly, irony is a cruel mistress." He sighed one of the heaviest sighs Yuuto had ever heard. Coming to this decision had to have been agonizing for him. "The moment I die, the Flame Clan as we know it will cease to exist. Homura may be a demon on the battlefield, but she is still only a child of ten, much too young to handle all the trials that come with authority and power."

“...You speak the truth.” Remembering Homura’s actions and words during their fight at the shrine, Yuuto agreed. She was still quite immature. Her innocence actually made her all the more frightening, but it also meant she was unlikely to play mind games with her opponent, especially given her age. She had no understanding of concepts like reading an opponent’s intentions or disguising her own, nor would she understand what it meant to search for an alternative solution to a seemingly impossible problem or to prepare for a pivotal meeting by maneuvering behind the scenes. These were indispensable tools in the world of politics, and Homura simply did not have the experience necessary.

“My Flame Clan is made up of fierce warriors, all with fire in their bellies. I do not think for a moment they will miss the chance to seize the opportunity should I fall. There is a good chance they will all convene to crush Homura first, as she is the most dangerous entity in the clan.”

The way Yuuto saw it, Nobunaga had probably hit the nail on the head. This was yet another example of the power balance in Yggdrasil. Even looking back through history, the Nomads were a strong meritocracy made up of many clans, but they unified when a leader powerful enough to rule them appeared. Once that leader died, however, they dissolved in an instant. From the information Kristina had gathered, the Flame Clan’s generals were akin to a ravenous pack of wolves—they may have been unified by Nobunaga’s unmatched charisma, but it was clear they would disperse immediately with his absence.

“Ran was set to be my successor, but he perished in the previous battle. Salk is skilled, of that there is no doubt, but he is underhanded. In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised for him to be the first to move to take over the Flame Clan. That is the way of Yggdrasil, so I have no room to complain, but I cannot entrust my daughter to such a man. I can easily see him using her to gain authority, then eliminating her when she has outlived her usefulness.” He let loose an exasperated sigh as he rested his hand on his cheek. One of the most precarious issues for a new ruler was how to deal with the family of the previous ruler. If they had no authority of their own to speak of, it was easy enough—they could just be married off and then treated cordially as a show of the new ruler’s gracious generosity. Homura’s circumstances were different, however. She

possessed the overwhelming strength of a twin-runed Einherjar. If she wasn't dealt with, whoever ended up taking over the Flame Clan would regret it once she came of age. Salk was one of the Five Division Commanders and by no means a fool. He of all people would have realized what risks would come with allowing Homura's continued presence within the Flame Clan.

"The bodyguards I've brought with me today are two of the Flame Clan's Five Blades. They have only muscles for brains, so wit and wiles are foreign to them. They will not be sufficient to protect Homura. When the chips are down and the Flame Clan is in disarray, they will not be able to act. You, however, are different, Suoh Yuuto." Nobunaga used his index finger to point right at Yuuto as a satisfied smirk crept across his face—as if Yuuto was some pet project he'd become proud of.

"You do know I'm your enemy, right?"

"Of course I do. I've got to say, I now know how Shingen must have felt..." Nobunaga said with a sarcastic chuckle. He was probably referring to the episode right before Shingen's death where he'd told his successor Katsuyori, on his deathbed, to rely on Uesugi Kenshin in the future. Uesugi Kenshin was Shingen's rival. They'd crossed swords five times on the battlefield in Kawanakajima, and he'd always been a thorn in Shingen's side when it came to conquering Shinano, which had been Shingen's greatest desire. Many veteran warriors had lost their lives during their skirmishes, including Shingen's beloved, reliable younger brother Nobushige. It was said that Shingen had wailed loud enough for heaven to hear when he'd heard the news. Regardless, Shingen's final message to his son had been to rely on Kenshin. In other words, this situation was similar.

"As one I am meant to defeat, I have researched you thoroughly, Suoh Yuuto. I know you well. You're an idiot that's too soft for his own good."

Yuuto smiled knowingly, unable to deny the comment. "I'm well aware." Perhaps he'd have been better served being crueler as a leader, but try as he might, it was never in his nature. One could say it was even a complex of his. If he'd been more coldhearted, could he have prevented the casualties he'd suffered? Those were the kinds of questions that often kept him up at night.

“From my perspective, your softness has no merit whatsoever and is only disadvantageous to you. I see it simply as a squandering of the talent the heavens have bestowed upon you. By all rights, you should’ve perished a long time ago in this chaotic world. Despite your shortcomings, you’ve managed to claim victory over and over, cheating death each time to stand before me now.”

“I didn’t do it alone. I’ve been blessed with many wonderful comrades.” For Yuuto, that was the unvarnished truth of the matter. Of course, he couldn’t discount the assistance his smartphone had lent him with its knowledge of the modern world, but if Felicia hadn’t taken care of him when he was weak and useless, Yuuto would be six feet under right now. If it wasn’t for the Wolf Clan’s former patriarch Fárbauti, Loptr would’ve long since cut Yuuto down. If the now-deceased Skáviðr hadn’t taken it upon himself to do the dirty work required of a patriarch, the naïve Yuuto’s heart would’ve shattered beyond repair. Without the master craftswoman Ingrid, Yuuto’s knowledge of the modern world would’ve gone to waste, his ideas remaining only on paper. Without Sigrún’s genius, he wouldn’t have been able to win so many battles. Without Linnea and Jörgen’s unmatched secretarial and political know-how, his half-baked strategies never would have come to fruition and never would have been executed. And lastly, but by no means least, Botvid and Kristina’s information network had rescued him from certain death time and time again.

Because he had been saved by these and so many other people, Yuuto was able to stand where he was today. That was what Yuuto believed from the bottom of his heart.

“So you say. The reason you are able to claim as much is likely the reason you’ve managed to survive up until now in the first place. It’s not like there aren’t examples of benevolent kings throughout history—the Emperor Gaozu of Han during the Han Dynasty, Liu Bei during the Shu Han Dynasty, or even Japan’s own Ashikaga Takauji. Not my type of leadership, though.” Nobunaga snorted, unamused. “But it was precisely because you have that quality about you that I ended up calling a cease-fire. How ironic that the one I could put the most trust in in the end wasn’t a retainer of mine, but my sworn enemy.” His smile seemed somewhat sad as he looked up at the sky wistfully, as if in remembrance. Nobunaga, too, probably had someone he’d been able to trust

from the bottom of his heart, and they were likely no longer in this world.

“I would say I’m honored, but I’m not sure that’s the right word to use,” Yuuto replied with a pained smile. Nobunaga had essentially told him he’d trusted him because he was too soft. That wasn’t easy for Yuuto to just accept at face value.

“Don’t worry, it’s an honest compliment. Of course, I won’t let you have my daughter for free. I’ll be taking equivalent compensation.”

“Compensation?” Yuuto couldn’t help but gulp. In the last battle alone, Yuuto couldn’t even begin to quantify how valuable Homura had been. What kind of compensation would be sufficient for someone like that? He couldn’t even begin to imagine.

“Hmm, let’s see. Ásgarðr, Bifröst, and Álfheimr will all be under the Flame Clan’s rule.”

“...Eh?” Yuuto accidentally let an idiotic-sounding noise leave his mouth. But that was not because Yuuto was surprised at the size of the demand. “...Is that all?”

In fact, the demand had been so anticlimactic that Yuuto doubted that was all there was to it. Nobunaga grinned like a child that had succeeded in pulling a prank on someone. It was a beaming grin full of vitality—not the kind one would expect from someone on death’s doorstep.

“‘Is that all?’” he parroted. “How disappointing. I was hoping my request would be completely off the table for discussion. I’m asking you to hand over almost all of the territory you rule over. You understand that, I hope?”

Just as Nobunaga had said, it was a huge chunk of land, to be sure. But because the citizens there had already moved, it was land that Yuuto had long since abandoned. It would be no skin off Yuuto’s nose if Nobunaga took over territory he’d already tossed aside. On the other hand, Yuuto had already deduced Nobunaga’s true motive in this deal.

“With this agreement, you’d have some fine battle spoils on your hands.”

“Exactly,” Nobunaga gave a satisfied nod as if to praise Yuuto for figuring it out. This long battle had caused the Flame Clan forces to dwindle by over ten

thousand, and even generals like Shiba and Vasserfall had lost their lives. If the clan's crown jewel, Homura, was also taken away, no doubt the remaining clan members would be unsatisfied with the outcome.

However, if Nobunaga were to end the war with possession over the lion's share of the Steel Clan's territory, Glaðsheimr included, it'd be a different story. No one would be able to complain in the face of such a massive success. They'd all unequivocally state that the Flame Clan had been the victors in the battle to rule Yggdrasil. Most people would probably also assume that marrying off Homura was a ploy to smoothly and peacefully gain the position of þjóðann by annexing the Steel Clan. Most of them would trust Nobunaga's judgment, and no one would be unsatisfied by the ensuing peace that followed.

"So? Your answer?"

"...May I lay down a condition of my own?" However favorable the conditions of a negotiation may seem, it was foolish to agree immediately. He resisted the urge to jump at the offer, maintaining a poker face.

"Oh? And what would that be?"

"I'd like to propose a treaty—one that allows the peace between us to last for all eternity. I want it to stay in effect even after you're gone."

In Yggdrasil, Chalicees were everything. But a previous Chalice could be reneged upon the moment the clan had a new successor. Fárbausti, the previous patriarch of the Wolf Clan, had learned that firsthand with Botvid of the Claw Clan. Nobunaga himself had said he didn't have much longer. Yuuto had to ensure this didn't happen again before negotiations went any further.

Nobunaga chuckled. "That's the first thing that comes to your mind, huh? Well, if you weren't that predictable, I'd actually be anxious." He grinned like he was having the time of his life. Yuuto had the feeling he was being tested. Nobunaga was exactly the kind of guy to offer up his own daughter and create an amicable mood, then lead his negotiation partner into a trap. His personality truly left much to be desired at times like this; he was an opponent Yuuto couldn't let his guard down around for even a second.

"Fine. I'll accept that condition," Nobunaga replied. "However, I'd like to leave a written record of our contract on both sides using tablets. Does that work for

you?”

“That’s perfectly fine with me.”

“So that settles it. Negotiations concluded.” Nobunaga stuck out his hand for Yuuto to shake. Yuuto nodded and grabbed his hand. Yuuto felt the solid, calloused hand of a warrior, who had no doubt trained by swinging a katana every day of his life without rest.

“We are gathered here today to forge a peace treaty between the Steel and Flame Clans. These proceedings will be conducted under the watchful eye of our highest Lord Aurgelmir, creator of this realm. First, both sides confirm the terms of the treaty written on their respective tablets.”

The sonorous voice of Alexis, high priest of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire, echoed throughout the room. Having once conducted all matters of the Chalice primarily in Alfheimr as a goði, his wealth of experience had made him the perfect candidate to preside over the formation of this treaty.

“Now, to each party, I ask, are there any discrepancies?”

“None to speak of.”

“None here either.”

Yuuto and Nobunaga gave the tablets a once-over and nodded their approval. The contents were exactly as they had laid out during their meeting. There were no mistakes and no additional clauses included that Yuuto hadn’t heard about.

“Then, both parties, please place the seal on your respective tablets.”

Yuuto did as he was told and took two cylindrical seals from his pocket. Placing the *side* of the seal onto the clay tablet, he rolled it around. He wasn’t just fooling around. The signature of the þjóðann of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire was printed firmly on the tablet. In modern Japan, seals were marked by placing the bottom down on the paper, but here in Yggdrasil, it was customary to use the side. Next, Yuuto took the other seal and rolled it underneath the previous seal on the tablet. This seal had his name printed on it. When he looked beside him, he saw Nobunaga had already finished applying his own seal.

“Thank you for granting your seals. I shall now pass each of your tablets to the other party.” Alexis retrieved both clay tablets, placing Yuuto’s sealed tablet in front of Nobunaga and vice versa.

“I know it may seem redundant, but please check the contents once more, and if there are no problems, place your own seal.”

Yuuto checked the tablet again, just as Alexis had told him to. They’d have a problem if Nobunaga had somehow changed the contents during the exchange. He didn’t think Nobunaga would resort to such petty tactics, but he checked just in case. The contents were the same as before. Yuuto rolled his own seal underneath Nobunaga’s. Once that was done, Alexis shouted out in a theatrical voice.

“O Gods in heaven! On this auspicious day, witness that the Steel and Flame Clans have successfully formed a peace treaty!”

A myriad of feelings arose from deep within Yuuto’s heart. Many had lost their lives throughout this long war, including Skáviðr and Thír. He would likely carry those emotional wounds for the rest of his life. There would probably be days of regret ahead where he would wish he had done things differently. Even so, their deaths were absolutely not in vain. It was precisely because they had been there that Yuuto had gotten this far. The long battle to decide Yggdrasil’s fate was finally over with the peace treaty being forged between the Flame and Steel Clans.

ACT 3

“Now then, please take your tablet. It has yet to fully dry, so take great care handling it.” Alexis held out the tablet, complete with seal and signature, in a ceremonious fashion. Yuuto carefully took it, holding it by the bronzed portion. The peace treaty was complete at long last, so he didn’t want to handle it improperly and accidentally smudge the writing.

“Kris.”

“Yes.” When he called Kris’s name, her voice came from behind. He expected nothing less from the Einherjar who bore the rune Veðrfölnir, Silencer of Winds, as well as the leader of the Steel Clan’s elite espionage unit, the Vindálfs—she had approached Yuuto without him even realizing.

“Deliver this to Felicia posthaste.” Yuuto quickly pressed the tablet into Kristina’s hands. While the treaty had now been established and was, by all accounts, in full effect, it was best to be totally prepared for the worst case. He didn’t want another Xiang Yu situation playing out. The proof of this treaty would be his ace in the hole in case things happened to go south. He wanted it delivered to a secure place for safekeeping as soon as possible. For that reason, handing it to Kristina was the optimal course of action, as she was a master at erasing her presence.

“It shall be done.” She was an intelligent girl. Immediately realizing what Yuuto required of her, she vanished without a trace. He hadn’t taken his eyes off her for a second, and yet he had no idea where she’d gone. Yuuto could always count on her.

“How uncanny. To think she’s able to conceal her presence in an instant... Not even the greatest shinobi in all of Japan could do that. You’ve been blessed with good servants, Suoh Yuuto.” Next to him, Nobunaga spoke in admiration. Having one of his children praised wasn’t a bad feeling per se, but...

“She’s not my servant. If we don’t clear that up right now, I worry for the future.” He made a show of shivering comically. He was partly joking, but that

was also how he truly felt, because that girl wouldn't let that sort of label slide, even if hypothetically it did come from her father Yuuto.

"Hmph. I can't say I understand that lukewarm nature of yours at all. If you go soft, the ones below you will go soft too, and your entire clan will suffer as a result." Nobunaga furrowed his brow as if Yuuto's actions were truly incomprehensible to him. He was the type of leader to strike fear in his retainers to get them to perform at one hundred—no, one hundred twenty percent efficiency. Yuuto didn't necessarily consider that wrong. Humans were lazy by nature, and if they didn't have fires lit under their rears, they wouldn't strive for excellency. But it was a double-edged sword, as it was easy to earn others' ire through that approach.

"I simply change my methods and way of ruling depending on the person. I determined that the girl earlier simply performs better when she's independent." Yuuto responded with a smirk. To Yuuto, Nobunaga was the kind of patriarch he most aspired to be, a ruler of legendary repute. However, he had no intention of copying his methods. He could never be as arrogant or heartless. He could only do what was suited to him, so he would simply stick to doing it his own way.

"So you say. Well, it's your territory. It's not my place to tell you what to do with it. You're free to do what you like." Nobunaga grinned like he was enjoying himself.

There were things that people could only understand about each other once they'd faced off in battle. Even if their ideals were different, even if he didn't understand Yuuto's actions, Nobunaga had probably grown to acknowledge Yuuto's methods.

"But it remains to be seen whether those methods will hold up in the long run. The real trial begins here, Suoh Yuuto. You'll be in an unfamiliar land, having to manage several hundred thousand citizens. You can't afford to be milquetoast there."

"You make a fair point." Yuuto nodded, considering Nobunaga's words. He had already constructed a decent plan for that, but the sticking point was whether it would play out as he hoped. An unforeseen conflict would most

assuredly arise, especially if he didn't survey the situation enough or prepare sufficiently. The troubles there were clear as day.

"Well, we'll manage. It's my first time, so of course I've prepared a trump card specifically for the situation."

"If you say so."

"Thanks for the warning, though."

"Hmph, I don't need your thanks. Now then, it's about time for me to return. I doubt my body can hold out much longer," Nobunaga said, clutching his flank. Yuuto noticed his face was covered in sweat. When he thought about it, it was natural. From the time he'd been shot in the stomach, he'd ridden a horse as he'd strolled toward Yuuto and company, engaged in negotiations with Yuuto, and taken part in the peace treaty ceremony—all things that would normally be impossible with wounds like his. There was no way he wasn't in pain. It had to have been pure agony.

"This is probably the last time we will see each other in this life. You may be my enemy, Suoh Yuuto, but you were outstanding. Should you join me in the afterlife, let us cross swords once again." The words were somber, but Nobunaga looked just as spry and fearless as ever as he grinned in what had to have been pure amusement. His strength of will was without peer. He was, without a doubt, the very same Nobunaga that had been one of the greatest to ever grace the pages of history.

"Good luck. You'll need it," he said as he whacked Yuuto on the back as hard as he could, turned on his heel animatedly, and strode away.

That was the last time Yuuto ever saw Nobunaga's figure. He would never forget the composed silhouette of the man, his back turned, for as long as he lived.

"Big Brother!"

"Father!"

The moment Yuuto had returned to his own camp after the ceremony, Felicia and Sigrún came running to greet him with pure relief on their faces. They had

surely already heard Kristina's report that things had gone off without incident. Still, knowing them, they probably hadn't been able to relax until they had seen Yuuto safe and sound with their own eyes.

"Hey, I'm back! And as you can see, I'm still in one...piece?!" Yuuto was about to pump a fist in the air to show he was in great shape when suddenly his knees gave out. He tried to right himself, but the strength in his feet had left him, leaving him helplessly falling toward the ground. The two girls quickly grabbed hold of him, keeping him from collapsing. As Einherjar, their reflexes were, to no one's surprise, second to none.

"Big Brother?!" the pair yelled in unison.

"Ha ha, sorry about that. Must've just tripped or something. Damn shoelaces... Huh?" Joking around to lighten the mood, he tried to stand on his own, but neither his hands around the two girls' shoulders nor his knees would respond. Apparently noticing something was wrong, Sigrún and Felicia looked frightful.

"It can't be... Slow-acting poison?!"

"Those underhanded Flame Clan cowards...!"

"Ah, no, it's nothing like that. I'm just dead tired. I'll be fine after a bit of rest." Yuuto quickly tried to quell the murderous aura emanating from the two of them. Sigrún and Felicia, normally such levelheaded girls, tended to behave unpredictably whenever concerns for Yuuto's well-being arose. Naturally, he didn't see any reason to worry yet, but he didn't want the treaty he'd worked so hard to forge to be nullified so soon.

"A lot's happened in a short period. I'm just exhausted is all." Yuuto smiled wryly. Thinking back over the events of the war between the Flame and Steel Clans, his fatigue was only natural. He had carried the burden of hundreds of thousands of his citizens' lives on his shoulders while forced into a battle against Oda Nobunaga that he couldn't afford to lose. On top of that, he'd had to appear calm and composed in front of his subordinates, and as stubborn as he was, he was now belatedly beginning to realize how much that had taken a toll on his psyche. When he'd seen the girls' faces, the last tense thread had snapped, and all the fatigue built up within him had come crashing down.

However, after all the stress, it was a feeling he welcomed.

“Sorry, guys. Just let me stay like this for a while.” He tightly hugged the two bodies supporting him, enjoying their warmth. Countless lives had been lost during this fight, many of them people Yuuto knew. It still didn’t feel real to him that they were gone—he even felt like they might show up tomorrow as if nothing had happened. Even though deep down he knew he’d never see them again, the reality of their absence hadn’t fully sunk in yet. He began to anxiously wonder if perhaps his experiences up until now were nothing more than a dream, and he’d eventually wake up to a totally different reality.

“I’m so glad you two are still alive,” Yuuto said to the girls, his feelings of joy and relief clear in his tone. Feeling their body heat and heartbeats through his clothes let him know that at the very least, Sigrún and Felicia were still here for him. Right now, that was what he wanted to feel most of all.

“Fatherrr!” A high-pitched voice came from afar—a voice he knew well, and one he hadn’t heard in a long time. He turned around to see a girl approaching him, her light-red pigtails blowing in the wind.

“Linnea!” Yuuto called her name, his voice brimming with joy. The last time they’d met was right before the Silk Clan crusade over three months ago. Though they’d secretly stayed in touch through written correspondence like letters, it couldn’t compare to the happiness he felt at seeing her in person once more.

“Huff...huff! I’m so glad...you’re okay!” Linnea tried to run to him but immediately became out of breath. Still, she looked thrilled to see him.

“Yeah, you too. Good job keeping the invaders from the west at bay.” Yuuto raised himself up a little and patted her on the shoulder. His body still felt like lead, but he wanted to reward the girl for her efforts in whatever little way he could. More than anything, touching her with his own hands would confirm once and for all that she really was alive and well.

“No, I must apologize to you. The fate of the Steel Clan rested upon this battle, and I was late in arriving. Truly, I am beyond reproach,” Linnea replied, sounding rather disappointed in herself.

“No, you did plenty. We were only able to eke out a victory thanks to you, in

fact.” The threat they’d posed to the enemy had increased tenfold just by having her present. Furthermore, Linnea’s western army of ten thousand had eliminated the allied forces of the Flame Clan’s General of Courage, Shiba, and General of Wisdom, Kuuga. Yuuto had no doubt that the main reason Nobunaga had proposed peace in the first place was because he had underestimated the strength of Yuuto’s auxiliary forces.

“I formed a peace treaty with Nobunaga just a bit ago. The war’s over,” Yuuto explained.

“Is that true?!” Linnea’s face suddenly brightened. Her generosity toward the common folk was unusual for a politician of her caliber, but she was probably relieved from the bottom of her heart that no more soldiers had to lose their lives. “Wonderful! Now we can focus our efforts on Project Noah! I’ll do my best to make up for my shortcomings in the war by being useful to you there!”

“Huff...huff... Your Highness...please, don’t run! Think of the...huff...child you bear!”

Linnea looked raring to go, both fists balled in excitement, until an out-of-breath Rasmus finally caught up to her a few moments later. As an Einherjar, Rasmus had made a name for himself as a warrior in his youth, though it seemed the passage of time had proved to be an opponent he could not best.

“Oh, right! You don’t wanna run like that, Linnea! It’s dangerous!” Yuuto hurriedly warned her. He’d been so preoccupied with the war against the Flame Clan that he’d completely forgotten about Linnea’s pregnancy. *“For me to forget something like that... Some father I’m gonna be...”* Yuuto thought self-deprecatingly.

“Hee hee. Oh, don’t worry, I can manage this much. Big Sister Mitsuki told me I should be getting more exercise anyway if I want this baby to grow up healthy,” Linnea replied confidently.

“She meant walking and stretching, Linnea. Seeing you run like that almost gave me a heart attack, so please don’t do it anymore. You should also lighten your workload by letting Jörgen handle most of the paperwork from now on.”

“Oh, Father, you sound just like Rasmus.”

“That’s because it is common sense, Your Highness,” Rasmus said, his face stern.

“You said it.” Yuuto nodded in agreement.

This was not 21st-century Japan. At Yggdrasil’s current technological level, it was common for about twenty percent of expectant mothers to die during childbirth. That percentage was alarmingly high to Yuuto, so he wanted to raise Linnea’s chances of survival as much as he could by ensuring she took proper care of herself.

“Really, you two are such worrywarts. I’m the very picture of health, see?” Balling up her fists as if to show off her strength, Linnea gave them a sprightly grin. Her complexion was good, and she did look healthy. Inwardly, Yuuto breathed a sigh of relief.

“If so, that is all that matters. Felicia is also with child, so I look forward to watching over two new members of the family before long.” Sigrún gazed at Linnea’s stomach warmly. From the time Yuuto had first met Sigrún, her expression had rarely ever changed, as though she were wearing a steel mask, but lately, she’d been showing more and more of her gentle side. Yuuto welcomed this new Sigrún.

“L-Lady Felicia too?! Why, it’s just one auspicious event after another! This calls for a celebration!” Rasmus looked shocked, but overjoyed. “Lady Sigrún, I suppose you are next?” he said with a grin.

“Not yet, I’m afraid,” she responded disappointedly.

“Hm, then you really need to try harder. Any child of His Majesty and Lady Sigrún would no doubt grow up to be a strong warrior—an invaluable pillar to support the Steel Clan in the future. A woman’s greatest purpose is to bear children, after all. It’s your duty to leave behind as much of His Majesty’s bloodline as possible.”

If this were 21st-century Japan, Rasmus’s words just now would definitely be instantly condemned as sexual harassment. Yuuto cringed inwardly.

“You make a good point. Truthfully, I have been thinking that it’s about time to have one of my own.” Contrary to Yuuto’s concern, however, Sigrún spoke

plainly as though it hadn't bothered her in the least. This was not Japan, but Yggdrasil, 1500 BCE. Sexual harassment and misogyny didn't exist as concepts here, so Rasmus's stance was likely the natural order of things. To Yuuto, of course, it was like being hit with a three-thousand, five-hundred-year generation gap. That said, the fact that he now had the capacity to concern himself over it meant that peace had finally come at last, and that made him glad. The war was over, and if he had his way, he'd like it to stay that way forever.

"Hm?" Then he suddenly noticed a horse galloping toward him. For an instant, he thought it might be an envoy from the Flame Clan, but he quickly corrected himself.

"Wait, is that you, Sigyn?" Yuuto asked the mystery guest.

It was indeed Sigyn, the wife of Hveðrungr, Yuuto's ever-reliable officer and confidant, and a powerful Einherjar in her own right known as the "Witch of Miðgarðr."

"Yup. Looks like I finally found you. I've been searching everywhere," Sigyn said from atop her horse. Her casual tone didn't seem like the kind you'd adopt with a þjóðann, and indeed, the Steel Clan members in the vicinity scrunched up their faces in displeasure at the disrespect, but Yuuto was so used to it at this point that it didn't bother him in the slightest. More to the point—

"Is Brother Rungr okay?!"

What concerned him was the golden-haired masked man leaning against her back. His arms were hanging limp, giving Yuuto an ominous feeling.

"Please be wrong." Yuuto said the words to himself again and again as if in prayer. But what came from Sigyn's mouth betrayed his hopes in the worst possible way.

"He's already gone. I always thought he was the kind of guy that was too stubborn to die, but he's gone."

"No...way," Yuuto stammered out.

Sigyn's tone had been so matter-of-fact that for an instant, he couldn't process what he'd just heard. Even after he belatedly realized what it meant, his

mind refused to accept it. Hadn't he been the one to wound Nobunaga so heavily by shooting him from afar? Somewhere in his subconscious, Yuuto must've assumed that he was alive and well based on that. That was why he couldn't accept Sigyn's news.

"Wh-What do you mean, gone?! A guy like him can't die so..."

"He pushed himself too far. Even after getting injured by that pint-sized monster from the Flame Clan, he told me he wouldn't retreat, and you know what he's like when he makes up his mind. He shot Nobunaga, then before I knew it, he was already gone."

"N-No way!" Felicia let out a pained shriek as she fell to her knees beside Yuuto. Though they weren't formally related anymore, Hveðrungr had been Felicia's actual older brother. They'd had some bad blood between them in the past, but as far as Yuuto could tell, they'd been close and had thought of each other quite fondly. In other words, the shock of this news was almost too great for Felicia to bear.

"...It does sound like something Brother Rungr would do." Yuuto frowned, and then sighed. Hveðrungr had had a lot of pride, and he hadn't liked to lose. He would definitely have exacted revenge on anyone who'd dared damage that pride. Underneath his aloof exterior had always lain a strong conviction and will.

"But you did too much this time. Didn't you...? Didn't you say you wouldn't die for my sake?!" Yuuto demanded of the deceased Hveðrungr.

There was no answer. He knew there wouldn't be, yet he was compelled to ask anyway. Just as Sigyn had said, he couldn't picture a man like Hveðrungr ever perishing. His judgment, which had gotten him through countless harrowing situations, had been far too sharp for that. Truthfully, Hveðrungr was the last person Yuuto had expected to die in this battle. The reality was so far removed from his expectations that he refused to believe it.

"First and foremost, let's get him down from the horse," said Rasmus. The nearby soldiers carefully lifted Hveðrungr's body down and lowered him to the ground. He was a man with all kinds of tricks up his sleeve, so Yuuto half-expected this to be another ill-natured prank of his and hoped that he would

jump up from the ground hale and healthy. Of course, that was merely a faint hope, and the man remained motionless on the ground. Yuuto put his ear to the man's mouth. He wasn't breathing. He placed a hand on his heart. There was no heartbeat. Hveðrungr was dead.

"This can't be happening... You've gone too far with this prank, Big Brother. Come on, it's lasted long enough, get up now..." Felicia's voice was shaking. Apparently still unable to stand, she approached Hveðrungr on all fours and grabbed his collar.

"I said get up, you fool! If you don't get up right this instant, I'm going to be really upset!" She shook him as she raised her voice. Of course, even she knew the truth of the matter somewhere in her heart. She knew her brother was dead. It was likely that she simply couldn't accept it. She wanted it to be some fabrication, a tall tale, and she couldn't discard that hope no matter how she tried. "That's enough already...!" She raised her hand and was about to deliver a blow to Hveðrungr's cheek when Sigrún suddenly stopped her.

"Felicia." Sigrún spoke just that one word and shook her head with a solemn expression.

"Th-This simply can't be. It must be another prank of his. There's no way Brother can be..."

"The ásmegin, the source of Hveðrungr's life force, has gone silent. You know what that means, don't you? He is dead, Felicia."

"No... It can't be... It... Waaaahhh!" Felicia suddenly collapsed on top of Hveðrungr's body, clinging to him as she sobbed. Sigrún silently embraced her. She and Felicia had been childhood friends since before she could remember, so she knew how much Felicia truly cared for her older brother.

"What do you mean...dead? What about the future?! What about what comes after?!" Yuuto spat in a strained, shaking voice as he watched the two of them. Yuuto and Hveðrungr had a long-standing rivalry with each other over who was supposed to succeed the Wolf Clan, which had even at one point resulted in a battle to the death. Even so, he could confidently declare that if he had not met Hveðrungr—if he had not met Loptr—then Yuuto would not be the person he was today. The smelting of iron—that was the first and greatest

trigger that led Yuuto to dashing up the path to ultimate authority. The Yuuto of that time was constantly scorned by his peers and called names like “Sköll, Devourer of Blessings,” but Hveðrungr had believed in that delusion of Yuuto’s, taking him under his wing and providing support no matter how many times Yuuto had failed. If it wasn’t for him, Yuuto likely would’ve gone unnoticed and lived the life of an ordinary man. He wasn’t just indebted to him; to Yuuto, Loptr had been someone he’d aspired to be, an older brother he could rely on more than anyone else. He couldn’t even count the number of times he’d been saved by Hveðrungr’s presence.

“It’s too soon. I haven’t even been able to repay you yet for anything you’ve done for me...!”

Yuuto had so much he owed Loptr for, and up until now, he’d only been able to repay it with animosity. Though it hadn’t been his intention, he’d usurped Loptr’s rightful place as the patriarch of the Wolf Clan, accidentally creating a reason for Loptr to murder his own parent and flee. Even after changing his name to Hveðrungr and becoming patriarch of the Panther Clan, Yuuto had intercepted him, crushing his path to conquest once more. Despite that, once he became a general of the Steel Clan, Yuuto had no choice but to rely on that remarkable strength of his time and time again. Thinking about it now, Yuuto was always the one to make Loptr draw the short straw. Yuuto must’ve always been like a divine pestilence to him.

That was why he’d wanted to repay as much of that as he could someday. That was why he’d been planning to give him a position and territory worthy of his strength in the new world and update his status from subordinate to believer through the Chalice.

“There were so many more things I wanted to tell you. So many more things I wanted to discuss and experience with you.” He felt his eyelids growing hot as he spoke, and tears spilled down his face. He felt like he’d finally just gotten close again on a personal level like they used to be. He was the one man he felt treated him as just a regular guy, not as a þjóðann or reginarch, and now he was gone. He would never hear his jokes or sarcasm again. That was, perhaps, the saddest thing of all.

“Pheew, I feel just a tad winded.” Letting out a long sigh, Nobunaga plunked down on an ornate chair in the audience chamber of Valaskjálf Palace—the throne. Thanks to Suoh Yuuto’s final plan in their war against each other, most of the palace was either reduced to rubble or burned to a crisp, but this audience chamber alone had stayed standing, perhaps because this was where the hidden passage leading outside of Glaðsheimr was located. But that didn’t matter to Nobunaga.

“So, this is the seat of one who rules heaven and earth? Not as comfortable as I’d imagined,” he muttered, his cheek resting on his palm in boredom. He’d finally achieved his long-sought-after goal. He was glad, that was certain, but he had been the ruler of an entire generation back in Japan. He was the kind of person who was only happy when he was trying to make something his, only to lose interest once he finally had it in his grasp.

“But, well, a promise is a promise.” With a small smile, Nobunaga produced a hair tie from his pocket. It had belonged to Ran, his loyal retainer who’d died protecting him.

“Conquer the world, eh?” Those were Ran’s final words to Nobunaga. “Are you watching from Valhalla, Ran? I’ve conquered it, just like you wanted,” he muttered, looking up at the sky. The casualties on the Flame Clan’s side had been overwhelming, but if the battle had continued unabated, the Steel Clan would’ve had little to no hope of winning after losing their main defensive stronghold. There was a ninety-nine percent chance that this war would have ended in Nobunaga’s victory. True, Yuuto was the type of frightening ruler that could have managed that slim one percent, but Nobunaga was always more focused on the result rather than the process. From a conquest perspective, the Holy Capital Glaðsheimr had fallen and Nobunaga had usurped almost all of the Steel Clan’s territory, so all the denizens of Yggdrasil under his rule would declare him the victor of this war—in other words, they would recognize him as the lord of Yggdrasil. And that wasn’t entirely false, since Nobunaga did now lay claim to most of it. Suoh Yuuto, however imposing, was no longer a threat to Nobunaga since there was such a large difference in the amount of land they each possessed. Yggdrasil was his at last.

“I’ve fulfilled your wish, Ran. So forgive me for not striking down your killer. I

am a ruler, but I am also a father.” Nobunaga bowed his head in shame. His grudge against Suoh Yuuto had not vanished, but he got the feeling that Ran would understand and accept Nobunaga’s decision. Ran was, after all, the one that held Nobunaga’s thoughts and desires in the most esteem.

“There you are, daddy! So you were here all along! You disappeared so quickly that I was worried!” His beloved daughter Homura poked her head out from the entrance and wandered toward him. That innocent figure of a daughter smitten with love for her parent was appropriate for her age—well, she was actually bordering on spoiled rotten, but that was precisely what made her so cute.

“No need to worry. I’m right here.” Grinning, Nobunaga lifted Homura up on his knee.

“Wah! Ha ha!” Homura let out a cry of surprise, but then beamed with joy, relaxed herself, and leaned back against him. Her entire body went slack, as if she were resting in some sort of recliner chair. That made Nobunaga smile. From an early age, Nobunaga had always been frowned upon by others, and when he grew older, he was only feared. His family had been no exception—back in Japan, there had always been an air of tension between him and his children. As a vivid example of that precarious relationship, during the Honno-ji Incident, when Nobunaga had first heard about the rebellion, he’d immediately suspected his own blood-related son Nobutada before anyone else. A proud parent though he may have been, Nobunaga had never before experienced the innocent love Homura offered from one of his offspring, so he couldn’t help but reciprocate. Belatedly, he realized that somewhere in his heart, this calm repose may have been what he’d truly wanted all along.

“Homura.”

“Yees, daddy?” She twisted her body around and looked up, staring at him with her innocent face. He felt a slight sense of trepidation at telling her what he was about to tell her. But there was no more time left. He had to say it now.

“I don’t have much longer on this earth, my dear.”

“What?! What are you saying all of a sudden?!” She raised her voice in a panic, sounding upset. She’d probably thought she and her father were now all

clear of danger, and in truth, with negotiations with the Steel Clan and the sealing ceremony behind them, they should've been. This announcement was probably like a bolt from the blue for her. But that peace was like the final bright flame of a candle before it was snuffed out.

“All things must die, my dear. Over the course of this life, I have taken hundreds of thousands of lives of my own. I won't say this is what I deserve, but my turn has finally come, that's all.”

Nobunaga's tone was casual, but it wasn't like he wasn't afraid of dying. It was just a result of his simple outlook on life: all humans must die someday. He was always prepared for death, therefore he always lived each day like it was his last.

“But I implore you, Homura, do not hold a grudge against the Steel Clan. Killing and being killed are inevitabilities of war, and the gods willed me to die someday. Why, I exceeded the fifty-year life span of a normal human by ten years. In other words, I turned a profit.”

“But... But...” Despite Nobunaga's explanation, Homura couldn't accept it. That was natural—to Homura, the Steel Clan was her father's mortal enemy. Nobunaga himself had succumbed to his thirst for vengeance when his family and retainers had been killed—having only sated it once he had burned thousands of innocent Ikkoshu believers alive.

Though if he was being honest, Nobunaga knew from experience that giving in to anger only worsened the situation. Nothing beneficial came from it. Even in the aforementioned burning incident, he became bogged down in a long-lasting war with the Ikkoshu as a result of his actions, delaying his unification of Japan by ten years.

Put simply, it helped nothing to do something so rash. He didn't want the young Homura to walk the same path of vengeance he once had. All Nobunaga wanted for Homura as her father was for her to live a happy life.

“In the first ten years of my stay in Yggdrasil, every battle had been smooth sailing, and nothing was able to stand in my way. Truth be told, I was ridiculously bored.” Nobunaga spoke in a tranquil voice as he reminisced on the past. Compared even to Warring States Japan, Yggdrasil's technological

standards had been exceedingly low, and that went for their rudimentary tactical playbook as well. Nobunaga had experienced tons of battles in the chaotic Sengoku era for the past fifty years, so rising through the ranks was like taking candy from a baby. Everything went according to his plans. If things had gone a bit shy of expectations, it would've at least been interesting, but with every single thing happening exactly the way he'd wanted it, winning every battle with absolutely no resistance, the embers of his heart had gradually cooled. He'd been living day-to-day, not knowing whether he was alive or dead.

"But this year has been so exciting! All thanks to that bastard Suoh Yuuto!"

"Bastard?"

"Yes, if he hadn't shown up, I might have brought Yggdrasil under my rule with ease! That simply wouldn't have been any fun! Life only has meaning when you're living desperately! Yes, I was deceived by the Steel Clan countless times. Yes, it was frustrating and painful. Yes, I even hated them at times, but when all was said and done, I had a great time facing off against them. Battling them was so satisfying." Nobunaga's tone was lilting, a boyish grin on his face.

Those were Nobunaga's pure, undisguised feelings. He had come at Suoh Yuuto intending to crush him with all his firepower and had managed to win from a territorial standpoint, but he'd suffered a big loss from a tactical one. But that was precisely why it had been so fun. Nothing was interesting about everything going exactly the way you wanted. Life simply wasn't worth living without enormous obstacles blocking your path forward at every turn.

"This year has probably been the most my blood has boiled with excitement in my entire lifetime. Of course, there were times I was full of anger and resentment, but now that everything's over, the only thing I feel in the end is gratitude."

"Grati...tude?" Homura parroted his words with a confused look on her face. She probably couldn't fathom how pushing him into desperate situations and threatening his very life countless times called for anything resembling gratitude.

"Hmph. My dear Homura, you of all people should understand what I'm talking about. Isn't it lonely to not have an opponent on your level? When you

faced off against that masked man, I watched you. You looked like you were having the time of your life.”

“Th-That was...!” She tried to deny it, but she was clearly flustered. That was likely because, in her heart, she knew Nobunaga had hit the nail on the head. She was a young girl, but she was also a twin-runed Einherjar. It was lonely being at the top. Like Nobunaga, she needed someone she could call her equal.

“If it wasn’t for that Steel Clan bunch, I would probably be living a shell of a life, bored and unsatisfied. But thanks to them, I was able to use the full extent of my strength and give it everything I had. They may be my sworn enemies, but I was lucky to have them.” He chuckled. The warmth in his tone was almost as if he was speaking of an irreplaceable friend.

“That’s why, my dear daughter, I’m leaving you to them.”

“Huh?!” Met with this information that came from seemingly nowhere, Homura let out a yelp of surprise. Nobunaga had a faraway look on his face as he continued.

“Once I die, go to them. It’s too dangerous here. After my death, someone will appear who will definitely want to use you to further their own rule.”

“Don’t worry about that! I’m strong! Anyone tries, I’ll beat ‘em up!”

“That won’t work. Homura, you may be strong, but you are still young. You do not have the skill or the personnel needed to oppose them. You will only become their prey. As your father, I cannot let that come to pass.” He used a stern tone on purpose. Truthfully, he did secretly think adversity might only make Homura stronger and positively affect her growth. She was, after all, a girl born with the luck of the gods and the strength to rule. Yet he purposefully struck down her suggestion. The reasoning behind that was—

“On top of that, you have no future in Yggdrasil.”

“Th-That’s not true! I’ll grow up to be big and strong so I can succeed you, daddy—”

“That’s not what I mean. Yggdrasil itself has no future, I should say.”

“What do you mean?” Homura tilted her head in apparent confusion.

Ruminating on how cute that gesture was, Nobunaga continued.

“I believe I’ve already told you that Suoh Yuuto and I come from a future thousands of years beyond this one. He apparently comes from a future over four hundred years later than mine, though.”

“U-Uh-huh.”

“According to him, this land called Yggdrasil will sink into the sea before long.”

“Huuh?” Sounding dumbfounded, Homura’s eyes went wide. It probably sounded like nonsense to her, like she couldn’t even imagine such a thing happening. “I bet he was lying.”

“It’s only natural you don’t believe it. At first, I, too, laughed it off as some farce. But he was serious. He was convinced of it enough to lead his citizens to the new world. He wouldn’t have gone that far if it were some delusion of his.”

“...You think?”

“I do. Another thing that lends credence to what he says is the earthquakes that keep occurring as of late. With that in mind, I have no choice but to believe it. It’s very likely Yggdrasil will indeed sink into the sea.”

She seemed to be lost for words at this shocking development. Of course, no one could expect her to readily accept such a ridiculous tale.

“Homura, you are still young. Rather than stay here in Yggdrasil, a land that has no future, I want you to go to the new world with Suoh Yuuto. This is not only an order of mine, but my final wish.” Nobunaga stared into Homura’s eyes sincerely, hoping that she would catch his meaning. She drooped her head, seemingly mulling it over. Silence dominated the room for about ten seconds, until Homura finally, hesitatingly, asked a question.

“That’s your desire, daddy?”

“Yes, I want you to travel to the new world and live a fruitful life there. That is my greatest desire.”

“...Then I understand.” Homura nodded, having made her decision. From her behavior, it was clear that deep down she still had reservations, but she couldn’t refuse a request from her beloved daddy. *“How lucky I am to be a*

father to this child,” Nobunaga mused.

“Ha ha. With this, I have no more regrets. I can finally head to Valhalla at peace.”

“Don’t say that, daddy! I want you to be with me as long as possible! I’ll do my best to keep you alive! I’ll give you as much of my ásmegin as you need, so...” Homura clung to her father with a tearstained face. He understood her feelings all too well. Nobunaga had also lost his father at a young age, and with no outlet to put his anger into, it’d ended up consuming him.

“I know, my darling girl. I want that too, but...” With a bitter smile, Nobunaga let out a small sigh. He could feel his strength rapidly leaving his body, and his consciousness was growing hazy.

He somehow knew that the moment he lost hold of that consciousness, he would likely never wake up again. In fact, he was only able to hold on this long through sheer force of will and should have died a long time ago. With everything done that he needed to do, his thread of tension snapped, Nobunaga was unable to stand up a final time.

“I would’ve liked to see where your journey takes you next, Homura.”

Summoning the last of his strength, Nobunaga patted Homura’s head.

That face of hers was still as innocent as ever. Her body was so small and light. He had reservations about leaving her in that state, but there was nothing more he could do about his current circumstances. Life didn’t always go as planned. If it did, it wouldn’t be any fun. Homura would likely learn from this sadness and grow even further. Watching her growth from afar would be enjoyable in itself.

“‘A man’s life of fifty years is as minute as a dream or illusion when compared with the earth and the sky.’ Hmph, and what a life it was. I have no regrets.” With those words, Nobunaga closed his eyes. His consciousness waned in an instant. But it wasn’t sudden and frightening; it was calm and gentle, like the darkness of the night.

“Daddy? Daddy?!”

He could hear Homura’s voice, but he could no longer comprehend what she

was saying. Soon after, even her voice faded away, and Nobunaga's consciousness sank into nothingness.

Just like the *Atsumori* warrior dance the man so enjoyed, it all really had been like a dream. The only one to set foot on and conquer both Japan and Yggdrasil, Oda Nobunaga, had breathed his last. It was said that when they found his body, there was a peaceful grin of satisfaction on his face.

ACT 4

The crackling and popping of flames resounded through the dark of the night. A bonfire burned brightly atop bundles of kindling, and Yuuto watched absentmindedly as the wind carried away the rising smoke. They were burning the bodies of those who had fallen in the last battle, including Hveðrungr and the Maidens of the Waves. He hated that they couldn't properly cremate the bodies of all those who'd perished, but Glaðsheimr was now Flame Clan territory, meaning they could no longer come and go as they pleased to retrieve every corpse. They'd barely managed to retrieve those of the officers.

"It's all just so sudden," Yuuto mumbled for what must've been the umpteenth time. The bodies being swallowed by the flames had been living, breathing people only yesterday. Yuuto had been acquainted with almost all of them, even conversed with most of them. He could clearly recall each and every one of their faces. Those very same people were no longer with him.

"Now I see what they mean when they say funeral rites are for the sake of the living, not the dead." He wasn't sure when, but he'd heard the phrase somewhere before. *"Whoever had said it, they were absolutely right,"* Yuuto thought. Holding a proper funeral was a way to provide closure to those who remained. It was a place where loved ones of the deceased could cry and grieve to their heart's content. From there, they could begin to accept the person's death and move forward once more.

"Hic...sob..."

"Mother Thír..."

"O Valkyries, watch over these heroic spirits and guide them..."

He heard mingled voices nearby, some thick with grieving sobs and some in prayer. Particularly audible among them were the voices of Fagrahvél and a number of other Sword Clan members.

"I'm so sorry. If I'd just been stronger..." Yuuto began to apologize, but

Fagrahvél merely responded with a shake of her head.

“You couldn’t help it. You were up against a twin-runed Einherjar. It’s likely that no one could have stopped her. We were just unlucky.” Fagrahvél looked exhausted and sorrowful. In the last battle alone, Fagrahvél had lost over half of the elite Maidens of the Waves, including Thír, Uðr, Kólga, Dúfa, and Læva. The way Yuuto saw it, the bond between Fagrahvél and the Maidens hadn’t been limited to their Chalice; they had practically been family. Yuuto couldn’t even begin to imagine the grief that Fagrahvél must have been feeling right now.

“All I can do now is pray for their happiness in Valhalla,” Fagrahvél muttered, her eyes on the rising flames. Yuuto couldn’t find the words to respond.

“If I had been there, I might’ve been able to match the twin-rune’s speed with my own...”

“Yeah, if only we’d been there...” Erna and Hrönn bit their lips in frustration. Hrönn’s good right arm was in a bandaged sling, and Erna was using a cane to compensate for her bandaged left leg. While managing to win their battle against Hyuuga, one of the Flame Clan’s Five Blades, the two of them were severely injured, forcing them to retreat to the rear lines.

In truth, Homura’s power was so overwhelming that the addition of the two girls wouldn’t have done a thing to change the outcome. In fact, getting injured and not being able to participate in the battle may well have saved their lives, but the pair wouldn’t be willing to acknowledge that themselves. Coming up with conditionals and what-ifs after the fact was human nature, after all. It would likely take quite some time for the Sword Clan girls’ hearts to heal.

“...My brother’s really gone.”

The pyre had died down and the sending-off ceremony was approaching its end when Felicia, silent up until now, suddenly spoke up. Perhaps she had finally begun to process her brother’s death after not being able to accept it for so long.

“Well, considering his nefarious exploits up till now, perhaps he finally got what was coming to him,” she said indifferently. True, Hveðrungr hadn’t exactly been a saint. He’d killed his clan patriarch Fárbauti despite the two being bound by the Chalice, engaged in assault and looting during the invasion of the Hoof

Clan, and razed his own clan's houses and crop fields to the ground to prevent the Steel Clan from invading. Of course, Yuuto knew he had reasons for doing those things, but most people would objectively view Hveðrungr's actions as treacherous.

"Really, I'm surprised it took this long for his misdeeds to catch up with him. I bet he was supposed to die a long time ago, but the gods gave him a pass so he could be a hero to the Yggdrasillians in the end," she mused.

It was a rather religious perspective on things, but it was clear she was just trying to convince herself. Perhaps that was her way of coming to terms with the tragedy—labeling her brother's death as an inevitability—simply an occurrence set in stone by fate.

"Maybe so," Yuuto replied, staring at the dwindling flames. By now he knew well that in times like these, people needed to come to terms with tragedy by attaching a purpose to it, no matter how much of a stretch it was. Not everyone was strong enough to accept death at face value.

"He was a criminal, and I can't defend what he did, but he was my kind, gentle, one-and-only brother."

"Yeah, I agree. He was kind." Yuuto thought back to the days of the Wolf Clan—to the time when they all lived together. He had been a strong, gentle, reliable older brother worth being proud of. Perhaps if Yuuto hadn't derailed it all, things would still be that way. When he thought that, Yuuto felt a pang of regret in his chest.

"I heard that his final shot turned out to be the trigger to finally end this long war."

"Yeah, it did. If it weren't for him, I'd probably be up there in Valhalla with him right about now." Just thinking about that possibility made him shiver. Seeing Homura was being targeted, Nobunaga used his own body to shield her from the bullet. Yuuto's last-ditch plan had been to snipe Nobunaga from afar instead, but even if Hveðrungr had followed orders back then, there was a good chance Nobunaga's wealth of combat experience and divine luck would have allowed him to avoid it. In other words, Hveðrungr's hatred for Homura had inadvertently been their saving grace. Or perhaps he had deliberately aimed for

Homura knowing how Nobunaga would respond? When it came to Hveðrungr, either scenario was entirely possible. Sadly, they would never know the truth now that he was gone. Either way, the fact remained that if just one thing had been different, peace would not have been possible. The difference between failure and success really had been paper-thin, like threading a needle.

“You think so too?”

“Absolutely. I’ll never be able to repay Brother Rungr for how much he did for me.”

“Then if this child is a boy, would you allow me to name him Hveðrungr?” Felicia massaged her belly as she asked with upturned eyes. Considering their relationship with each other, Yuuto thought it was quite a stiff way of asking, but he did understand. She probably wanted to leave behind proof of her brother’s existence, something to symbolize the bond between the two siblings. “Naturally, I’ll raise him to make sure he doesn’t make the same mistakes my brother did.”

“Yeah, I think that’s a great idea. I’m sure he’ll grow up to be wise and strong, just like Brother Rungr.” Yuuto replied, nodding emphatically. Naming him Loptr would likely be frowned upon by Wolf Clan veterans. That grudge would likely transfer to their offspring, and Felicia’s child would most likely end up bullied. The name Hveðrungr, however, was shared with the hero of the Steel Clan—their savior—so there would be no problem. Yuuto didn’t want the brotherly bond between the two of them to vanish either. He thought that perhaps by naming his child after him, he could begin to compensate for what he had been unable to repay. To be honest though, that was merely an attempt to make himself feel better about everything that had happened.

“Linnea, what does our food supply look like?” Yuuto asked.

“Taking the citizens into account as well, we have enough to last us until we get to Silk Clan territory.”

“Over twenty thousand soldiers escaped to the east in the last battle. I’d like to retrieve them, but do we have enough provisions?”

“That shouldn’t be a problem.”

“You’re honestly a lifesaver, Linnea. I wouldn’t have been able to manage all that.”

Soon after they awoke the next morning, Yuuto and his main generals set about preparing to retreat from the area. With peace successfully established between the Flame and Steel Clans and the dead properly sent off, there was no longer any reason to stay. Once preparations were complete, Yuuto turned around to take one last look at Glaðsheimr.

“Now that we’re about to leave, I’m getting all sentimental, huh?” Yuuto muttered. He had, after all, spent over a year in Glaðsheimr. This was also the resting place of two people he had treasured, Sigrdrífa and Skáviðr. When he thought about how he’d likely never return to this place again, sadness squeezed his heart like a vise.

“Indeed. Honestly, even now I find myself wanting to remain here to mourn Lady Rífa and the others.” Beside him, holding down her hair blowing in the wind, Fagrahvél gazed in Glaðsheimr’s direction along with Yuuto, a pained expression on her face. Sigrdrífa had been like a younger sister to Fagrahvél, and Fagrahvél had held a deep bond with the five deceased Maidens of the Waves as well, so Yuuto thought it only natural that she had doubts about leaving.

“I understand how you feel, I really do. But I don’t think that’s what Rífa would want.”

“Yes, I know. There’s something Lady Rífa entrusted to me as well, so I can’t remain here.”

“Oh?”

“Did you forget? I am to have a child with you and name it as Lady Rífa specified.”

“Wait, wha—ah!” For an instant, Yuuto was dumbfounded, but then remembered. On Rífa’s deathbed, the two of them had indeed had that conversation. Since Fagrahvél hadn’t alluded to it and Yuuto’s mind had been preoccupied with the war against the Flame Clan and Project Noah, it’d slipped his mind completely.

“Uh, I think that what she meant back then was that she wanted you to find a partner that you could be happy with, not necessarily me. She said it *could* be me, just as an example.”

Those words of Sigrdrífa’s were also meant to keep Fagrahvél from committing suicide. If she hadn’t said them, Fagrahvél would’ve almost certainly followed her in death.

“There’s no need to be so hung up on me in particular or anything,” Yuuto reminded Fagrahvél. “Rather than restricting yourself because of some misunderstanding, find someone you truly like, get married, and have a kid with them instead. That would probably make Rífa way happier.”

Rífa had truly loved her milk-sister, but at the same time, she had felt guilty about always placing the burden on her for her own sake. Yuuto wanted to respect the wishes of his late wife and ensure that Fagrahvél lived a life of happiness.

“Yes, I agree. That’s why I’d like it to be you, if possible.”

“I said, someone you truly like. As in, love.”

“That shouldn’t be an issue, as I am smitten with you, My Lord.”

“...Huh?” Yet another dumbfounded noise escaped Yuuto’s throat. He was certainly not expecting that response. In the first place—

“W-Wait, but, there’s been nothing in your behavior thus far that seems...”

“In such a critical moment for the Steel Clan, I could not allow my personal feelings to get in the way of your decisions. Also, if I had shown such a vulnerable side of myself, my subordinates would never have let me hear the end of it.”

“I...suppose that’s true...” He was still shaken on the inside, but he nodded. She spoke as if she were delivering a battle report or political update. That was par for the course for someone as matter-of-fact as her, but it contained no trace of the bashfulness or sex appeal one would expect from someone in love, making Yuuto wonder if she was really telling the truth.

“To be honest, I was at odds with myself on whether or not to tell you. I do

not dress like a woman, nor do I have any feminine qualities to speak of. Not to mention, I am well into my twenties—past the typical age for marriage and well past my prime to receive affection from a þjóðann such as you.”

“Really? I don’t think that’s true. You’re plenty attractive and charming in my book.” Yuuto quickly cut her off. He wasn’t just trying to console her—Fagrahvél was indeed a beauty in her own right. Sure, she was a bit stoic and exceedingly blunt, but that straightforwardness was what Yuuto liked about her.

“Then whenever it strikes your fancy, I would be happy to receive your favor, My Lord.”

“Well, right now my mind’s preoccupied with Project Noah, so let’s talk about that after everything’s all settled.” Unable to give an immediate response, he answered evasively. It had been the wish of his late wife, so naturally he wanted to make it happen. That said, since he hadn’t seen himself as the target of Fagrahvél’s affection, his heart wasn’t quite ready. He needed a bit more time to get his thoughts in order.

“Of course, that is no problem. After all, the last thing I want to do is place unnecessary stress on you.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it.”

That ability to separate personal matters and business at a moment’s notice was just like her. At least until the situation calmed down, it looked like he had bought some time to decide.

“Well, as sad as it is to leave, I guess we should get a move on.”

“Agreed.”

Nodding to each other, Yuuto and Fagrahvél turned around, when—

“Father, we have a situation.” Kristina came running to meet him, seemingly in a panic. She wasn’t typically the type to get flustered. “Lady Homura has come to us!”

“Wait, Homura’s here?” Yuuto blinked in light surprise. Typically, political marriages were commemorated with lavish ceremonies which required intense preparation. Homura’s was not supposed to be for another three months or so.

“What, has she come to evaluate her future husband’s prospects? Ha ha ha.” He laughed dryly, his face slightly tense. Although a treaty had been established between him and her father, he wasn’t sure how Homura herself felt about the whole thing. Yuuto had heard from the now-deceased Hveðrungr that Homura was a selfish girl that always wanted her way, which was precisely the impression he’d gotten of her during their previous encounter. In other words, he had no idea what was about to happen. She was a child possessing peerless strength—practically a walking land mine. He had a bad feeling about this. She was someone who could seriously set his nerves on edge in a different way than Nobunaga had.

“Apologies for the late greeting, Lady Homura. I welcome you from the bottom of my heart.” Once preparations were made at a fever pitch, Yuuto rolled out the red carpet for Homura, inviting her into their camp. Not that there was much of a red carpet to roll out—they had been on the cusp of retreating, and most of the camp had already been broken down, after all. Still, it was important to keep up impressions. He wouldn’t be much of a reginarch if he couldn’t manage this much.

“So what brings you to our humble camp? As you can see, we’re currently occupied with getting ready to leave, so I can’t offer much of my time. I’d like you to keep it short.”

“Daddy is dead.”

“?! ”

Yuuto’s eyes went wide. “*Nobunaga, dead? Already?*”

“...Are you...telling the truth?” He had to confirm, carefully. Yuuto was not expecting this development. Nobunaga had looked so full of life when they’d last met, so Yuuto had assumed he’d had a few more months left in him, at least.

“Why would I lie about something like that?! I’m here because Daddy told me I should go to you if something happened to him!” Homura yelled angrily, her eyes brimming with tears. It didn’t seem like an act, and above all, considering her age and what he already knew and had observed of her, she didn’t seem capable of such trickery.

“I see... So Nobunaga is dead. We crossed swords a number of times, but he was an incredible man I respected from the bottom of my heart. I offer my sincere condolences.” He put his hand on his heart in a gesture of sympathy. Meanwhile, the gears of his mind were rotating at full speed. While his sympathy was the real thing, this was no time for complacency. Now that the charismatic force of nature Nobunaga was gone, the Flame Clan was sure to be in major disarray. He had to think about how to proceed from the perspective of the Steel Clan’s supreme commander.

“Wow.” Homura’s eyes widened in surprise.

“What?”

“Nothin’. Just, daddy said the same thing about you.”

“Nobunaga did?”

“Yeah. He said that he was able to enjoy himself because of you. He said you were a great man despite being his enemy.”

“Ha ha, what an honor.” Yuuto’s lips naturally turned upwards. He couldn’t help but feel happy at being acknowledged and praised by someone else, especially when it wasn’t just flattery. “Though, I can’t say it was a fun experience for me at all. Your daddy was so crazy strong that I couldn’t enjoy myself in the least.”

“Of course. He’s my daddy, after all!” Homura nodded happily, now in high spirits. He could tell that she loved her father and how proud she was of him. “But I think you’re also pretty strong. You were able to survive against both me and Daddy.” Homura nodded emphatically. No doubt offended by Homura’s disparaging attitude toward Yuuto, the generals around him began to get restless. It was one thing if it was Nobunaga, but this was a little girl looking down on Yuuto—the fact that she was a twin-runed Einherjar didn’t matter in the slightest to them. They probably thought her behavior the height of insubordination.

“Yeah, he really did give me a hard time. As a father and daughter duo, you were a force to be reckoned with, for sure.” With a bitter smile, Yuuto raised his right hand toward his retainers in order to silence them before they said anything unbecoming. Yuuto had no love for ceremony and formality in the first

place, and these were the words of a mere child. There was no need to get up in arms over every little thing she said.

“Hee hee, right? Right? Together, daddy and Homura are the strongest!” Homura threw out her diminutive chest in pride. Yuuto sensed he was beginning to get the hang of how to handle her. It was painfully clear that she was obsessed with her father.

“But wow, looks like you really do understand! I might be starting to like you just a little bit. I’ll never forgive you for hurting daddy, though!”

“Enough! How dare you talk so high and mighty, brat!” Fagrahvél roared. “Are you aware of how many of our troops you cut down?! Do not tell me you aren’t!” Of course, she was aware of the engagement to Homura. However, Homura had killed five girls who had been like daughters to her. It was wholly unsurprising that she was unable to stand by and let Homura say whatever she wanted.

“Hmph! Don’t lump daddy in with those small fries!”

“Small...! How dare you call them that?!”

“What’s wrong with calling it as I see it?”

Homura and Fagrahvél glared at each other as they exchanged verbal blows. Sparks seemed to fly between the two of them.

“*Gimme a break.*” Yuuto was compelled to hold his head in his hands. Looking at it objectively, Homura was definitely the one in the wrong. He didn’t doubt that for a second. Maybe if she was a normal child he could scold her and be done with it, but Homura was a twin-runed Einherjar and a loose cannon he didn’t want going off under any circumstances, as well as the princess of the Flame Clan he had just forged a peace treaty with. He couldn’t afford to upset her any further.

“*Which means it’d be great if Fagrahvél would be the adult here...*” But judging from how things looked right now, that was definitely not going to happen. Bára had grabbed her and was currently trying to restrain her, but she showed no signs of backing down. To begin with, she had always been stubborn. No matter her opponent, she would not stand for anyone insulting

those five girls she adored.

“Daddy was everything to me! I won’t forgive anyone who hurt him, and that’s final!”

“You think you are the only one who feels that way?! The people you killed also had families, even lovers!”

“Who cares about them?! Daddy’s much more important!”

“Mggh! This conversation is over! This is why children are...”

“Excuse me?! Did you just call me a child?!”

“Oh, I sure did. What is wrong with calling a child just that?!”

In fact, the argument was only getting more and more heated as it went on. At this rate, there could even be bloodshed.

“Calm down, you two.” Sensing he had to do something, Yuuto stepped in to mediate. He felt like a mouse about to face a lion, bear, or any other predatory animal. In other words, he’d really rather not.

“Do not order the great Homura around! The only one who can order me around is daddy!”

“How dare you speak that way to Milord, the þjóðann! You may be Nobunaga’s daughter, but I will not stand for this any longer!”

“Oh yeah? And how are you gonna stop me? You wanna go? I’ll take you on whenever you like!” A mischievous grin appeared on Homura’s face. Neither of them had yet laid hands on a weapon, but she was clearly ready to do battle. The moment Fagrahvél drew her weapon, Homura would strike back with glee. Yuuto was certain of it.

“Give it a rest, you two. Simmer down!” Unable to stand it any longer, Yuuto raised his voice. He thought that would at least bring Fagrahvél back to her senses, but...

“Didn’t I just tell you to not order the great Homura around? I came here because this was daddy’s last wish, but get all high and mighty and I just might kill you, okay?” Speaking in a tone several degrees below zero, all emotion had disappeared from Homura’s face. The killing intent there was clear. Sigrún and

Hildegard immediately moved forward to shield Yuuto.

“So that’s what he meant by having the qualifications to take care of Homura. That old bastard.”

As the conflict reached a fever pitch, Yuuto clucked his tongue inwardly. He now understood what Nobunaga truly meant by “leaving Homura to him.” There was no way Nobunaga wouldn’t have been aware of his daughter’s arrogance. He also probably knew that particular part of her had to be reformed. But Homura was a twin-runed Einherjar that possessed outlandish strength without peer. It would take a certain breed of courage to get her to listen to anyone. Anything short of that, and she’d simply cut him down where he stood.

“I’ve got a whole other host of problems to deal with, and now I’ve got to play babysitter.”

In other words, Nobunaga was basically asking him to tame a wild, bucking horse. He’d given Yuuto quite the impossible task as a parting gift. But Yuuto wasn’t the type to run away with his tail between his legs.

“Oh? Then come at us with all you have,” he said coldly with narrowed eyes. He immediately switched into battle mode. At this point, Yuuto wasn’t going to be frightened by a *mere* twin-runed Einherjar. He’d faced opponents much more formidable and crossed tightropes much more harrowing.

“Hmph! Don’t act all uppity like you can win against me!”

“Oh, I can definitely win against you. If you think I’m lying, try me.”

“Oh?” At Yuuto’s provocation, Homura crouched down, assuming a battle stance. “Then I’ll come at you with all I have!”

In the next instant, she flew forward, reaching Yuuto’s side in an instant—or so she had expected...

“Hya?!” With a comedic yelp, Homura’s foot slipped and she fell to the ground. A carpet was spread out under Yuuto’s chair to welcome the guest. The part of the carpet in front of Yuuto had a metallic sheen—it had been covered in oil. That oil had caused Homura to slip. However, it wasn’t a trap laid for her specifically—it was a countermeasure against potential assassins. That wasn’t

the only thing prepared, though.

“Gleipnir!” Felicia and Sigyn’s overlapping voices arose immediately afterward as they unleashed their seiðrs. A double layer of golden chains manifested, binding Homura to the ground. Gleipnir was the seiðr that had first brought Yuuto to Yggdrasil. It captured and bound abnormalities, and when used on an Einherjar, it could sap them of their superhuman strength. Furthermore, to err on the side of caution, the two had already performed the prerequisite strengthening rituals for the seiðr, so this was much stronger than the typical instant-cast Gleipnir.

Even so, Homura was a twin-runed Einherjar. A single Gleipnir might be able to subdue a normal Einherjar, but even bound with a double Gleipnir, Homura was able to force her way to Yuuto. Her speed, however, was much less monstrous than before—down to the level of a normal Einherjar.

“Too slow,” Sigrún said coldly, and made her move soon after. “My turn!”

Thanks to that, subduing her was as easy as taking candy from a baby. Sigrún grabbed Homura’s arm, twisted it, and expertly pinned her to the ground with the use of the Willow Technique, applying weight to her twisted arm. In perfect synchronicity, Hildegard added her own body weight to Homura’s back and arm, rendering Homura immobile in a matter of seconds.

“Gh...mgh...let...go!” Naturally, Homura struggled to break free, but even the twin-runed Einherjar was powerless to resist against the combination of double Gleipnirs and two Steel Clan Einherjar.

“Well, that was faster than I expected.” Yuuto coldly looked down at the helpless Homura. From Hveðrungr’s impressions as well as what he’d witnessed with his own eyes, he’d fully expected Homura to go berserk and had already prepared for that eventuality. He’d even had other tricks up his sleeves in case these measures hadn’t been enough, so he felt like this outcome was a bit anticlimactic.

“Th-That’s not fair!”

“There is no concept of fairness in war. At the very least, your father Nobunaga would not have fallen for such rudimentary tactics.”

“Guh!” Homura bit her lip in anguish. As Yuuto had expected, mentioning her father had hit a nerve.

“Did you forget that I am the man who managed to hold his own against your father for so long? *A mere twin-runed Einherjar is nothing to me.*” Yuuto snorted, unamused. Twin-runed monsters? He’d already been there, done that with Steinþórr. However terrifying her strength was, she wasn’t a challenge for Yuuto if that was all she had to offer. What frightened him, what really made him sweat, were visionaries like Nobunaga and Hveðrungr, who possessed both animalistic instincts and outstanding leadership skills.

“The only reason you ever gave me a hard time was because Nobunaga was right there, behind you in the shadows.” This was not Yuuto being a sore loser; these were his true feelings. Back during the war, he’d only been forced to disperse his army because he was up against an army led by Nobunaga. She had only been a threat because, at the time, most of his brain power was spent on trying to anticipate and preemptively counter Nobunaga’s next move. She had been maybe second or third on the priority list. If she alone had been his opponent back then, he could have come up with a host of ways to deal with her—just as he had now.

“Now then, what to do?” With his hand on his chin in thought, he intentionally spoke in an unaffected, emotionless tone. At times like these, the less emotion he showed, the scarier he would seem. He shot a lightning-quick glance over to Felicia, brief enough that Homura wouldn’t notice. Felicia nodded in response.

“I recommend you kill her and be done with it. Not only was she disgustingly rude to you, Big Brother, she even tried to assault you. The only place fit for her is the gallows.” Her words were as macabre as the sadistic smile that appeared on her face. As his ever-faithful adjutant, she had understood what Yuuto was trying to do without even exchanging a word—he had come to expect nothing less of her by now. But Homura was too naïve to realize that it was an act.

“Wha—?! You were the one that provoked *me!*” Her voice was thick with panic. She probably didn’t think she deserved to be punished just for that. Not only had she possessed overwhelming strength since birth, but she’d also had the great Nobunaga as her father. Up until now, she’d been given free rein to

do whatever she wanted without consequence.

Unfortunately for her, the real world wasn't so forgiving. This was no longer the Flame Clan; this was the Steel Clan, who, up until yesterday, had been her enemy. If she tried to be selfish here, there was only one way things would end.

"Good idea, Felicia. I agree. Now that she's been captured, we should kill her immediately. If we leave her be, who knows what kind of dangerous seeds she'll spread."

"No objections here. After all, she was the one to disturb the peace by picking a fight. We're simply obliged to follow through."

"Riiight. Nobunaga's gooone, so if she goes tooo, the Flame Clan will be nothing but fifty thousand useless soldiers. It might be better for us to strike now so we don't have problems laterrr."

One after another, Sigrún, Fagrahvél, and Bára agreed upon Homura's execution. Either realizing the severity of the situation or recognizing their minds would not be so easily changed, Homura immediately burst into tears.

"Now, now, settle down. I understand where you all are coming from, but she's just a little girl. There's no need to be so vicious toward her." Understanding that it was about time to throw her a bone, Yuuto interjected. The three girls had probably been a little too cruel, honestly. She may have been a twin-runed Einherjar, but bullying little girls wasn't exactly a pastime of his. Still, it was important to play bad cop before being the good cop. For the sake of future relations, he needed to show her how frightening the Steel Clan could be.

In Yuuto's experience, types like Homura who were quick to lunge out and bite would only listen once they were confronted with someone stronger. He also knew that once they had acknowledged his strength, they would cooperate without harboring any particular grudge. Sigrún, Linnea and Steinþórr had all been great examples.

"Now do you understand which one of us was acting all high and mighty?"

"Mgggh!" When Yuuto bent down to meet her gaze, Homura glared daggers at him, bitter regret on her face. Beaten so soundly, she could not retaliate. It

appeared that the dent to her rather large ego was really making her blood boil.

“You may be strong, but in the end, you’re still just a kid.”

“Don’t you say the same things my daddy did!”

“Oh? So Nobunaga also saw through you, huh?”

“Guh!” Homura gritted her teeth in frustration.

“But being young means you still have room to grow. With a proper education, you could probably catch up to my level in no time. Nobunaga entrusted you to me, after all. If you so desired, I could teach you everything I know.”

“Huh?!” All the Steel Clan generals let out a cry of surprise in unison.

“B-Big Brother, surely that’s too magnanimous...”

“I agree with Felicia. Bestowing the enemy with knowledge doesn’t seem too wise.”

Felicia and Fagrahvél admonished him with stern faces. Of course, their concern was valid. Homura held no loyalty toward Yuuto. She already boasted overwhelming power; giving her knowledge on top of that would make her truly unstoppable. They probably thought it was a crazy notion—he’d essentially be creating a monster.

But Yuuto had the strongest trump card of all. Motioning for the two girls to settle down, he spoke gently to Homura.

“And, I can tell you things you might not know about Nobunaga.”

At those words, the look in Homura’s eyes instantly changed. They were brimming with fury just a moment ago, but now they shone with curiosity.

“I know Nobunaga very well. Especially when it comes to the things he did in a little country called Japan before coming to Yggdrasil.”

“R-Really?!”

“Indeed. In my homeland, Oda Nobunaga was a very famous hero. Upon becoming a patriarch, his was the book I took the most pages from. I know all the legends.”

“T-Tell me!”

“I will, as long as you promise to be a good student and learn other things as well. Also, you don’t have to worry about me, but apologize to Fagrahvél over there.”

“I’ll study! I’ll apologize! So... Please tell me about daddy!”

Just as he’d expected, it was super effective. She took the bait immediately. There was no better lure for a daddy’s girl who’d just lost her father. He did feel guilty for exploiting her weakness, but if he hadn’t, as the Steel Clan’s reginarch he would’ve had to *actually dispose of her*. However, killing a child would’ve really left a bad taste in his mouth. Guilty or not, this choice had been the lesser of two evils.

“Rún, Hildegard, let her go,” Yuuto ordered.

“As you wish.”

“As you command.”

The two girls had apparently also determined that Homura was no longer a threat, as they complied immediately and released her from her restraints. Homura dashed toward Yuuto immediately on all fours like an animal, so excited she didn’t even give herself time to stand up.

“Now! Tell me about Daddy right now!” Her eyes sparkled with excitement. She really was hopeless when it came to anything to do with Nobunaga, it seemed. That aspect of her was so childlike, it made Yuuto want to smile. But while he felt his mouth begin to slacken, she had been entrusted to him by Nobunaga directly. He couldn’t afford to spoil her as a guest. Using every ounce of effort to maintain a stern face, Yuuto spoke.

“Before that, apologize to Fagrahvél, the one that you argued with earlier.”

“Okay, okay! All I gotta do is apologize, right?!”

“Wait, wait!” Just before Homura was about to fly to Fagrahvél like a cannonball, Yuuto stopped her. “Do you even know what you’re apologizing for?”

“Huh? Nope! But I just have to say sorry, right?” Homura responded. She had

no clue.

“I knew it.” Yuuto smiled bitterly in his heart. Glancing beside him, Fagrahvél looked unamused, with half-lidded eyes. A vein in her temple was bulging like it was about to burst. *“Good god, this girl’s gonna be a handful.”*

“You can’t just apologize and be done with it. You need to understand what it is you’re apologizing for.”

“But I can’t help it if I don’t know! How am I supposed to know or care what weaklings like her are thinking and feeling?!” she said with a pout. True, for someone as strong as her, she wouldn’t have needed to care about normal people’s feelings. Yuuto knew what it was like to give up on understanding others when in the throes of despair. He’d experienced something similar when confronted with the difference in values between this world and the modern one. He’d thought they were wholly different—that there was no way they could possibly understand each other. But Yuuto had also learned from experience it was wrong to be stuck in that state of mind.

“You don’t need to think that hard about it. You were super, super sad when you lost your father Nobunaga, weren’t you?”

“Yeah...”

“And that was because you loved him a lot, right?”

“Yeah! I loved him so much! And yet... And yet...”

“Yes, it is sad to lose a loved one. I was super sad when I lost my mom as well, you know.” Yuuto nodded, looking up at the sky and recalling that time. When he lost his mom, a presence in his life that always should’ve been there, that feeling of loss opened up a hole in his heart from which only a freezing wind blew. “Other people are the same as you, Homura. Fagrahvél also lost someone special in this battle.”

“Huh?!”

“She’s feeling the same sadness you’re experiencing right now.”

“The same...sadness?” Homura sputtered, clutching her chest with an expression that was unreadable.

“That’s right, it’s not just you. We’re all sad when we lose someone we love. On that point, everyone’s the same, whether you’re a twin-rune Einherjar or a normal human.”

“The same... You’re saying she feels like I do right now?”

“Yes. And while you’re having those painful feelings, what would you do if someone told you that Nobunaga was evil? That he was a small fry who didn’t matter?”

“...I’d want to kill them. No, I’d definitely kill them.”

“And now you know how she feels.”

After that, Homura acted swiftly. Without even being told to, she ran to Fagrahvél.

“I’m so sorry! I didn’t realize you were in so much pain...” She bowed her head deeply. Her voice sounded earnest, as though her apology was from the heart and not just saying what she was instructed to.

“It seems you understand now, so we’ll leave it at that. I also should have considered the feelings of a young girl who just lost her father.” Fagrahvél accepted Homura’s apology and bowed her head as well. Of course, politeness aside, she probably hadn’t completely forgiven Homura with just an apology alone, but here she was showing her maturity as an adult and as the patriarch of the Sword Clan. She was also probably being lenient with Homura because she was a kid. Yuuto would have to thank her for that later.

That aside, Homura’s arrival and the typhoon of conflict she’d brought with her had abated for the time being. Yuuto breathed a sigh of relief.

“All right, now that that’s all settled, to Jötunheimr!” With discussions over, Yuuto clapped his hands to get everyone moving. He wanted to get back to Mitsuki and his children, as well as his comrades in the Silk Clan, as soon as he could.

ACT 5

“Let’s see... Today I’ll tell you about the Battle of Okehazama. This was Nobunaga’s turning point, you could say. There were close to twenty-five thousand Imagawa troops, while the Oda forces Nobunaga led were only two thousand in number.”

“Wow! That much of a difference?!”

“Yes. Normally, there would be no hope of victory, but the strategies Nobunaga employed were clever and innovative, absolutely outstanding.”

“Really?! What kind of strategies?! What kind?!”

On the way to Jötunheimr, Yuuto regaled Homura with tales of Nobunaga’s exploits. There wasn’t much to do while traveling, after all, so he felt it was a good way to kill time.

“First, on the night before the decisive battle, he gathered his retainers, but he didn’t tell them any details about the plan. Instead, they engaged in pointless chatter until dusk.”

“Huh? That doesn’t sound like something daddy would do, though.”

“Well, yeah, you’re right. He didn’t have much patience for pointlessness, after all. Of course, this was all part of his plan.”

“I see, I see.”

“They were wholly outnumbered by enemy soldiers. There wasn’t much hope of winning, so it was entirely possible some of his retainers would turn traitor. In other words, the reason he gathered them in one place until late at night was to prevent them from betraying him. He didn’t tell any of them the plan so none of them would leak it to the enemy.”

“Ah, of course! That’s my daddy!” Homura hit her fist with her palm in realization.

“That caution he had was something you need to work on. That’s the number

one most important quality for a leader to have.”

“Mggh, I know, I know already! Tell me more!” She pouted in dissatisfaction, but she didn’t argue. Yuuto nodded.

“Even though Nobunaga knew the enemy was about to attack, he didn’t move one inch from his castle. His retainers all thought that he was trying to hole himself up, but...”

“Go on, go on.”

“The moment he heard that his Marune and Washizu fortresses were under attack by the Imagawa Army, it was said that he leapt up, sang and danced the *Atsumori*, made combat preparations, and headed to the fortresses to do battle.”

“To save them, right?! Daddy swooped in to save the day!”

“Uh, no.”

“No?” Homura tilted her head in surprise. It was natural to think so considering the flow of the story, but this was the genius Nobunaga they were discussing.

“I said it earlier, didn’t I? With the difference in numbers between the two sides’ armies, there was no way for Nobunaga to win. That’s why he used both fortresses as a trap to reduce the enemy forces. That was also why he didn’t move from his own castle until he heard the report that the enemy had started attacking both fortresses.”

“Oh, I get it!”

“With that, the Imagawa Army had been whittled down to just five thousand men. The heavens were also on Nobunaga’s side. There was a torrential downpour, and Nobunaga used that opportunity to stage a surprise attack on their camp, splendidly defeating the enemy general!”

“Yaaay! That’s my daddy!” Homura jumped up in a cry of victory. Yuuto also nodded in agreement.

“It really was something only he could do. I’d never be able to emulate that.” Yuuto simply didn’t have the decisiveness to utilize his allies as throwaway

pawns. However, he had to acknowledge the brilliance of the plan. He even thought there was no other path the Oda army could've taken to win. Divide and conquer—it was the most rudimentary of tactics in the military playbook, but it was the kind of victory only Nobunaga could achieve, the man who was perfectly fine with losing a battle to win the war.

“And that concludes the story of the Battle of Okehazama. How was it? Did you like it?”

“Yeah!” Homura nodded emphatically. “Hey, next time I wanna hear a story about daddy’s children!” She brought her face to Yuuto’s and started clamoring for the next story. She was awfully close. It hadn’t even been half a month since he started telling her Nobunaga’s stories, and she was already this warmed up to him.

“His children, huh? You know, you seem to like stories like that.”

“I mean, of course I’d be interested in my brothers and sisters!”

“Well, that makes sense. Hmm, but well, I’ve already told you about Nobutada, Nobukatsu, and Nobutaka, so who else is there? Honestly, I don’t really know that much about his children. Ah, what about his father?”

“My grandpa?! Yeah, I wanna hear. I wanna hear!”

“Okay. Now then, let’s see... Nobunaga’s father was named Nobuhide, and...”

“Big Brother, I apologize for interrupting your story, but our destination is in view.” Felicia, who had been listening silently up until now, spoke up apologetically.

“Oh, at last!” Yuuto jumped up and lifted up the cover on the horse-drawn carriage. In the distance, he could see the towering, red-bricked castle walls and the water sparkling in the sunlight on either side of them. He’d only gotten to see this scenery once on account of the sudden report of the Flame Clan’s attack, but even so, it wasn’t something he’d soon forget. This was the Silk Clan’s capital, Utgarðar, located on the very edge of eastern Yggdrasil. It was the Steel Clan’s font of hope—their bridge to the New World of Europe.

“Yuu-kun! Welcome back! I’m so glad you’re safe!”

The instant they arrived in Utgarðar, a black-haired girl came running to greet them. Her name was Mitsuki Shimoya. She was Yuuto's childhood friend, his wife, and now the mother of two of his children.

"Hey, I'm back! Safe and sound, just as I promised!" Yuuto unconsciously broke into a run as well and went to embrace her. He enjoyed the soft sensation of her skin on his, and his nose tickled with her familiar scent he'd enjoyed since when they were kids. That made him fully realize he was home, which filled him with a sense of accomplishment...and fear.

"Yuu-kun?" Noticing that Yuuto was trembling, Mitsuki called his name anxiously.

"Just let me stay like this for a while longer." He hugged her more tightly.

"Sure. Welcome back, Yuu-kun... Don't worry, I'm right here."

She'd apparently figured out how he was feeling, because she quietly placed her arm around Yuuto's back and hugged back just as tightly.

He had promised himself that he would absolutely come back to her and their children at all costs, but there were no absolutes in this world—especially when your opponent was Oda Nobunaga. Publicly, he'd always made sure to maintain his composure, but more than a few times he really had doubted that he would return home alive, especially in the final battle. On the receiving end of Homura's assault, he'd been prepared to die right then and there. That was why being able to return home and feel Mitsuki's warmth once more filled him with undeniable happiness, but also belated, unadulterated fear.

"Whew, looks like I've calmed down a bit now. Thanks, Mitsuki." After five whole minutes of clinging to each other, Yuuto released Mitsuki.

"You don't need to thank me. I was happy too. It made me realize you were finally here, actually alive."

"That so?" Yuuto responded with a small smile. It seemed Yuuto hadn't been the only anxious one. Mitsuki, too, had been beside herself with worry.

"Thank you as well, Felicia, for bringing Yuuto home safe and protecting him."

"No, no, I didn't do anything special."

“That’s not true. If you hadn’t been with me, I would’ve been seriously up the creek!”

Felicia shook her head in humble denial, but Yuuto wasn’t going to have any of it. He made it very clear how important she’d been. All Yuuto had done was give the orders, and that alone wouldn’t make the clan run as smoothly as it had. It may have been behind the scenes, but it was no exaggeration to say that Felicia’s coordination skills were the backbone of the clan itself.

“I believe it. Yuu-kun can be quite careless. If he didn’t have you to keep him in line, Felicia, he’d screw up somewhere for sure.”

“You’re not wrong, but when *you* say it, it kinda pisses me off...”

“Wh-Whaddaya mean by that?!”

“I mean, you’re way clumsier than me. Remember what happened in third grade?”

“...Third grade? What are you talking about?” Mitsuki tilted her head in confusion, uncertain what Yuuto was referring to. Or perhaps the event had been so embarrassing she’d blocked it from her memory.

The corners of Yuuto’s mouth turned up in an evil grin. “Oh, you know, *that*. Here, I’ll give you a hint—w...e...t...y...o...u...r...”

“...Ah! Aaaah! You did not just bring that up, you jerk! I can’t believe you!”

“Mwa ha ha, I’ll bring it up anytime I want.”

“Mrrgh! Then allow me to enlighten everyone present about the incident in sixth grade, when you were teasing me about not being able to ride a bike with no hands. To show me how it was done, you gave me a perfect example...of toppling over and falling on your face!”

“Th-That’s dirty, Mitsuki! Mentioning that is off-limits!”

“And you think what you said wasn’t? If you want to air out my dirty laundry for everyone, then I have plenty to air out of yours! Nyah nyah!” She put her thumbs on her temples, wagged her hands, and stuck out her tongue in an immature display. A vein suddenly started throbbing in Yuuto’s temple.

“Oh, good to see you’re just as annoying as ever!” he spat with a scowl and a

click of his tongue. But on both their faces were definite traces of happiness. She was the only one he could ever banter like this with, after all. Their treatment of each other hadn't changed since they were children, and that was why the only place he truly felt at home was by Mitsuki's side.

"Oh, Father! Welcome back! As sweet on Mitsuki as ever, I see!"

Yuuto and Mitsuki's heckling of each other continued until a large man who could quite easily be mistaken for some kind of bear appeared before them. Yuuto immediately broke into a smile.

"And you, Jörgen, are just as healthy as ever, I see!" He clapped the man hard on the shoulder. Jörgen had been one of his advisers back when Yuuto was still serving as the patriarch of the Wolf Clan.

"Taking down that Flame Clan general must've been quite a task, but I knew if anyone could do it, it was you!"

"It's not like I did it all by myself. Everyone helped out."

"Ah, but gathering great warriors and utilizing them to their full potential is something only an excellent ruler can do!"

"If you say so." Yuuto smiled wryly and shrugged. He was about to protest at being held in such high regard, but then he realized that would be rude to his comrades, who believed in him enough to not only go along with his reckless plans, but give it their all to make them succeed. Even the ones who'd died had trusted him...

"So, how're the guys from Glaðsheimr doing? Everyone make it here okay?" Even so, he didn't handle praise well, so he quickly changed the subject.

"Most of them arrived here safely, with almost no deserters. As for living quarters, we've given them a provisional tent outside the castle grounds for now."

"That so? Good. I knew I could count on you."

The population of Glaðsheimr had been over a hundred thousand. Under normal circumstances, it would be impossible for nearly all of them to hang on through such a long journey. Thankfully, Jörgen had been in charge of their

evacuation and migration. With multiple stab and slash wounds adorning his bald head, cheeks, and eyebrows, he had a face the average thug would wet themselves running from. However, he was diligent in looking after his fellow clan members, and he excelled as a statesman who understood the subtleties of emotion and empathy. That was why Yuuto had chosen him to lead the citizens of Glaðsheimr to safety, and he'd exceeded Yuuto's expectations.

"However, that's not to say there aren't some restless dissenters. Glaðsheimr was the most civilized region in Yggdrasil, after all."

"Yeah, living in tents as refugees would definitely be quite the culture shock for those city-dwellers."

"Exactly. They were okay with it while traveling because they were able to keep their distance from the Flame Clan, but now that everything's settled down..."

"They've spent so long living the good life that they can't accept their current living conditions, huh?"

Jörgen heaved a troubled sigh. Yuuto could tell this had been worrying him for a while.

"I see. Looks like we don't have time to waste then."

"Indeed. At this rate, it'll only be a matter of time before they revolt."

"You're probably right. Not only that, but if the refugees from Bifröst and Álfheimr were to join in, then there's no way we'd be able to control the situation." Just imagining that scenario sent a chill down his spine. Sure, they were common folk without any combat training or discipline, so they could be subdued with brute force, but killing the citizens he'd worked so hard to save would defeat the purpose of rescuing them in the first place, and it was something he wanted to avoid at all costs.

"Where are Ingrid and Al? At port?"

With that resting in the back of his mind, he had to take stock of the current situation. Ingrid and Albertina were integral to Project Noah's success, so he wanted to hear their report posthaste.

“Ingrid should be at the shipyard near the port. Albertina has yet to return from the New World with her fleet.”

“...I see.” Yuuto bit his lip tightly. Judging by how little time had passed, he’d figured Albertina would still be absent. She might have been a genius who could read the winds like the back of her hand, but there were no absolutes in this world. As unlikely as it was for something to happen, he couldn’t help but worry.

“Don’t worry. I know for sure that Big Sis Al is doing just fine,” Kristina said with a smile, as if reading Yuuto’s thoughts.

“Thanks for the encouragement. And...sorry. I know you must be the most worried of all.”

“Huh? I’m not worried about her in the least,” she said bluntly. Apparently, she really wasn’t. It was often said that fraternal twins had an almost supernatural connection to one another—when one got hurt or experienced a large shock, the other would feel it, no matter how far away. Countless similar instances had been documented in the modern world, so perhaps Kristina too could feel Albertina’s presence somehow.

“Well, if you say she’s fine, then I won’t worry.” Yuuto nodded. Even if it stemmed from the occult, multiple documented instances were enough for Yuuto to believe it. “Guess I’ll go see Ingrid, then.”

Bang! Bang! Bang! The sound of hammering resounded all throughout the shipyard, along with the mingled voices of carpenters. Even though it was nearly winter, the atmosphere within was heated and lively.

“Hey, you! I see you slackin’ off! Put your back into it!”

“There you are, Ingrid!”

“Who’s— Huh?! Yuuto?! Wait, is it already today?!” When Yuuto called out to the red-haired girl he’d spotted working among the burly men, she blinked in surprise. Judging from her words, she’d known that Yuuto was arriving today, but it seemed that she’d been so caught up in her work that she hadn’t realized the date had changed. A very Ingrid thing to do, for sure.

“Hey, that’s not a very satisfying greeting. And after I made it a point to see you first thing upon arriving in Utgarðar...”

“Wh-What?! You did?!” Ingrid’s cheeks immediately flushed scarlet, and her mouth slackened in a happy grin. As always, she wore her emotions on her sleeve. It made Yuuto wonder how he’d ever been dense enough to not recognize the obvious signs. Now he just thought it made her really cute.

“Yeah, I just couldn’t wait to hear about the progress on the ship, you know?” he replied, teasing her a little. He couldn’t help himself.

“Wait, *that’s* what you meant?! Oh, okay, I see how it is!” Her expression did an about-face as she curled her lips in an angry pout. “*That face is just as cute,*” Yuuto thought. But unfortunately, he couldn’t risk ticking Ingrid off any further. He had business with her.

“Just kidding, just kidding. I also wanted to see you. Honest.” He clapped his hands together in apology, but...

“‘Also?’” Ingrid glared at him with half-lidded eyes. That was when Yuuto knew he’d screwed up.

“Ah, no, I really did want to see you...”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it. You wanted to hear the details on the ship, I know. You just needed to know how the construction was comin’ along.”

“No, I meant what I...”

“Don’t worry, I get it. You don’t want Ingrid the woman, you want ‘Ívaldi, the Birther of Blades.’”

“Th-That’s not true! Honest!”

“Snk... Heh hhe heh... Ha ha ha!” Watching Yuuto get ever more flustered, Ingrid snickered, then finally burst out laughing. Apparently, he was the one being teased all along.

“Heh... Okay, we’re even now,” Ingrid replied with a satisfied grin. She didn’t look upset in the least. “You’ve been workin’ hard with a lot on your mind and a lot of responsibility on your shoulders, so there’s nothin’ for it. I understand.” Ingrid patted him on the shoulder hard twice as if to console him. Honestly, that

casual attitude of hers was like a panacea to him right now. Despite seeming short-tempered at a glance, she was able to understand and sympathize with his circumstances, which was also a huge help. She was also willing to shoulder part of his burden and walk with him together. He remembered that when he'd first come to Yggdrasil four years ago, it had been Ingrid's kindness that'd saved him from his useless, despicable self.

"Sorry, Ingrid. When all this is over and everything's settled down, I promise I'll make it up to you."

"Yeah, I'm not gonna hold my breath on that one." She chuckled jovially, as if she hadn't taken him seriously at all. But perhaps that was what he deserved for being so inconsiderate up until now. Still, Ingrid hadn't given up on him despite his flaws, and he was beyond grateful for that. He had to make sure she knew how important she was to him. He was struck with the sudden desire to tell her how he felt.

"Ingrid, I..."

"It's a ship! It's Miss Admiral! Miss Admiral's returned!"

"Really?! She's finally back?!"

"Pull her in, lackeys!"

"Yeaaah!" the men shouted in unison. The words that he'd made up his mind to tell her were drowned out by their squalid voices. The mood was no longer right.

"Oh, looks like Al's back!" Ingrid, too, was now solely focused on Albertina's return. He had completely missed his chance.

"Well, that's nothing new for the two of us, though." He could go with the flow a bit before telling her. *"That in itself would be interesting,"* he thought as he and Ingrid ran to the port.

The port was already packed with people. Off in the distance, five massive ships with sails adorned with the Steel Clan's emblem approached the shore.

Kristina yelled out to the girl standing beside her. "Felicia!"

Felicia gestured to her to wait a moment, then replied as she handed the binoculars she was currently holding over to Yuuto. “Yes, here you go.” When he looked through, he saw a familiar girl straddling the goddess figurehead on the ship, waving at them enthusiastically with both hands.

“Looks like she’s just as energetic as ever.” Seeing her carefree smile through the binoculars, Yuuto broke into a grin. Even if Kristina hadn’t doubted Albertina’s safety, it was a completely different thing to see her alive and well with his own eyes.

“Hey, Yuuto, show me too!”

“Huh? Oh, sure. Here.”

“Thank ya. Oh wow, it really is her! She’s looking just as spry as when she set sail. And the ship... Can’t really see too well without zoomin’ in, but I don’t see any major damage to the hull.” Ingrid nodded in satisfaction. As the creator of the ship, she was, unsurprisingly, concerned about its integrity above all else. As the ship inched ever closer, Albertina’s figure became more visible to the naked eye.

“Yeaaah!”

“Miss Admiraaal!”

“Hail, Miss Admiral!” Gruff shouts suddenly overwhelmed the port. There must have been over a thousand overlapping voices, and baritone ones rather than tenor, creating a cacophony. Yuuto’s honest impression was that he wanted to cover his ears.

“She just waved at me!”

“No way! She waved at me!”

“Idiots! She’s waving at all of us, of course!”

In no time at all, an ugly turf war threatened to break out. Yuuto had read in Botvid’s report that the sailors, cabin boys, and shipwrights all thought of “Miss Admiral” as an idol-like presence, but this was beyond even his imagination.

“...Man, she’s popular.”

“Yeah, it’s like she excels on every level, including the strange ones...”

“Big Sis Al has always possessed an inordinate amount of charisma. Even back home, people would always call out to her and give her food and such.” Responding to Ingrid’s strained smile, Kristina’s own smile was dry, as if confirming in her heart that her sister was beyond help. The two of them didn’t seem to want to get caught up in the din. Yuuto was of the same mind.

“Besides, with that many people clamoring around, the ship won’t even be able to dock,” Yuuto muttered, scratching his head in vexation. He wanted to hear about the New World as soon as possible, but the macho men crowding around to greet Albertina had formed a throng around the dock.

“Hail, Miss Admiral!”

“Hail, Miss Admiral!”

“Yeaaah!”

He didn’t want to approach them. He didn’t even want to consider moving from the spot he was currently in. He wanted absolutely nothing to do with that mess.

“I’d like to do an about-face right here and never look back, but it looks like I’ve gotta suck it up and get in there.”

It was none other than Yuuto who had sent Albertina to the uncharted continent in the first place. It simply wouldn’t do for him as a reginarch to refuse to meet her when he had already come this close. Strange rumors might begin to surface if he were to leave now.

“Looks like you hesitate in the strangest of places as always, Father. It’s quite surprising to see that a bunch like that would intimidate you after all you’ve accomplished...” Jörgen sucked in a breath. “Subjects, open the way for your þjóðann!” His voice boomed in a way that seemed to rend the air itself. Yuuto wondered in admiration how one man could emit such a volume.

It was ridiculously effective. The pairs of eyes all on Albertina suddenly turned to face Yuuto, and not a moment later, the throng parted like the Red Sea, creating a clear path.

“There you go,” Jörgen said with a smirk as he gestured Yuuto forward. He seemed to be used to this line of work. Yuuto was able to do the same when

leading soldiers in battle, but perhaps due to his sensibilities as a Japanese citizen born in the 21st century, he couldn't bring himself to order normal civilians around. He felt it was a breach of his authority to do so. In that sense, he was grateful to have Jörgen step in, but was it just his persecution complex, or did those eyes of the men staring at him seem critical and begrudging?

"Ah, Father! Kris! I'm back!" Albertina waved to them, leaping from the figurehead. Yuuto's eyes went wide, but if he leapt out of the way instead of catching her, he would be a failure as a reginarch. He managed to catch her before she fell to the ground.

"Tch!" When he did, the sound of clucking tongues filled the air. Yuuto resolved in his heart to, at least while walking around in this town, have a bodyguard with him at all times.

"All right, let's hear the details." Once they'd boarded the carriage, Yuuto asked Albertina about her findings. Of course, he hadn't had the courage to ask back at the port. The surrounding gazes had concerned him so much that he knew he wouldn't be able to focus on what she had to say anyway.

"First, let's start with the elephant in the room. Does the New World exist?" Yuuto unconsciously gulped after he said it. While he was convinced it was there, if she happened to say that it wasn't, it would mean he would have to make a whole new plan from scratch.

"Oh yeah, it exists. And it's just like the map you showed me."

"Yes!" Yuuto couldn't help but pump a fist. If it was the same shape as on the map, it had to be the continent of Europe. There was no doubt now—Yuuto's hypothesis had been right on the money.

"Then what about *that place*?!" He leaned forward in excitement despite himself. Truthfully, he'd had a place in mind to immigrate to for quite some time. Near the Strait of Gibraltar, known to be the entrance to the Atlantic Ocean and Mediterranean Sea on a map of modern Spain, was Doñana National Park, a huge area spanning over 54,000 hectares. According to legend, this was said to be where the Tartessos Empire had flourished, and where many theorists across history asserted that the lost city of Atlantis lay. The sticking

point, though, was that it was the last bastion in Europe for preserving nature, and even in the modern world was never significantly excavated for fear of negatively influencing the ecosystem. In other words, he could bring people and objects to that place without it significantly affecting history. Naturally, he didn't want to alter the course of history if he could help it. If he was careless, the butterfly effect might render him unable to save Yggdrasil in the end. That was the possibility he was most afraid of.

"Ah, that place? We investigated, and we didn't detect any signs of residency!"

"Really?! Yesss!" He pounded his fists together in victory. This was another welcome development. If there had been people living there already, the Steel Clan might have had another war on their hands. That had been something else he'd wanted to avoid dealing with.

"Then I advise we send out our first fleet of refugees at once," Jörgen offered, turning his attention toward Yuuto.

"Good idea. Ingrid, how long will inspecting the ship take?"

"I'm thinkin' three days, at least. If something needs repairin' it'll be longer, of course. It'll be a long voyage, so we oughta err on the side of caution."

"Agreed. Running into trouble because we rushed our preparations would defeat the purpose of the entire operation. I leave it to you, then."

"Yep, you can count on me!" Ingrid pounded her chest. Her reliability knew no bounds.

"Al." Next, Yuuto addressed the girl who'd just returned from a long voyage.

"Yep yep!"

"For these next three days, focus on resting. You haven't seen Kristina in a long time, so you must have missed her. Hang out with her as much as you can until the next voyage."

"Roger! I have so much to tell you, Kris!"

"Unfortunately, I have nothing of note to report to you."

"How mean! Well, listen to all I've accomplished then! Your big sister tried

really hard, you know!”

“There’s nothing more boring than a braggart.” Kristina turned the other cheek. It would seem that Kristina had to tease Albertina for a bit before she was satisfied. After all, Yuuto knew well that Kristina loved her sister more than anything else in the world. Even though she probably wanted more than anything to ask about Albertina’s exploits, she was one of those girls that had to play hard to get until the very end.

“Listen to her, Kristina. That’s an order from me. A change of pace for Al is a chance for her to de-stress, which is vital to the success of this mission.”

“Well, if it’s an order from Father, I suppose I can’t refuse.” Sensing he had to toss a life preserver out to remedy the situation, Kristina nodded, but looked reluctant. However, her folded hands resting on her lap were trembling in anticipation. It was rare for a girl as constantly stoic as her, but she couldn’t hide her true feelings this time. She probably couldn’t wait to spend time with her sister after so long.

“So, I hate to rush you, but once the repairs and inspections of the fleet are complete, I’d like you to set out to the New World once more with everyone in tow.”

“Roger that!”

“I’m counting on you, *Miss Admiral*. That’s because I know I can.”

“Gotcha! Hee hee, having you call me that is a little embarrassing, though, Father,” she said shyly, but she didn’t seem to reject the moniker either. Reading into her response, it was clear to Yuuto that she had confidence in herself and felt good about what she’d accomplished overseas. The girl who felt pride yet also inferiority toward her brilliant, capable younger sister was long gone. She was now just as reliable as Yuuto could hope for.

“Oh, Father! I’m thrilled to see you’re well. And Al and Kris have returned from their duties as well, it seems! I’m so proud to be their dad.” While heading to the palace, a portly, slovenly, middle-aged man rushed over to Yuuto. Though his servile smile was his trademark, he’d always had a sharp light in his narrowed eyes. His name was Botvid, and he was Albertina and Kristina’s birth

father. Despite appearances, he had risen through the ranks to become the Claw Clan's patriarch through his own skill, and his shrewdness was what caused Yuuto to place as much faith in him as he did. Currently, he was serving as Utgarðar's representative patriarch.

"Dad! I'm back!" Albertina practically leapt into her father's arms.

"Yep, you look full of energy, Al!" Hugging her, Botvid's shrewd nature seemed to collapse as he couldn't help but be overjoyed at his daughter's return. Looking at his expression, it was hard to believe he was the same sly fox known as the resource hub for all the neighboring clans.

"Long time no see, Dad." On the other hand, Kristina gave a light, noncommittal greeting. Judging from her casual demeanor, you wouldn't think she had just returned alive from the fiercest battle in Yggdrasil's history, but that was par for the course for her.

"Seems like my other daughter hasn't changed a bit either!" He didn't seem to mind as he replied. He was her father, so he was more than used to her behavior by now.

"Sorry to put a damper on the father-daughter reunion, but let's hear your report, Botvid."

"No problem. I thought you might want information as soon as possible, so I went ahead and compiled all my findings in this letter." His face quickly changed from doting father to shrewd patriarch as he gestured toward the palace entrance. He was always so resourceful, even in this unique situation.

"I'll check that later. Just give me the rundown as we walk." Yuuto proceeded at a quick clip toward the palace. Depending on the issue, he may have to prioritize handling it over reading the letter. Yuuto had learned from experience that priorities were everything when becoming a patriarch.

"At once, Father. Well, everything was going smoothly on the political front. The Silk Clan bureaucrats had been incredibly cooperative." Utgarda, the previous patriarch of the Silk Clan that had once ruled this land, had been an inhuman tyrant who ruled her children through fear. In comparison, Botvid's ability to clearly distinguish between the carrot and the whip must have seemed like heaven on earth to the Silk Clan, so it was no surprise they were

complying. The annexation of another country was always a delicate matter because of rising emotions and differences in customs, but if everything was going swimmingly, Yuuto couldn't ask for anything more. Things surely weren't going to continue to be so simple, however...

"I couldn't help but notice you used past tense."

"Yes. With the arrival of the civilians of Glaðsheimr, there's been some conflict."

"Yeah, I heard as much from Jörgen."

"Last night at the bar, a verbal argument broke out, leading to a brawl involving dozens of men. The officials on duty handled the issue promptly, but the situation was awfully touch and go."

"First I've heard of that, but yeah, that doesn't bode well." Yuuto made a face like he'd bitten down on a persimmon.

"Indeed. I've dispersed some of my men throughout Glaðsheimr's civilians, but this incident may escalate the public's dissatisfaction beyond repair."

"At this rate, war's definitely going to break out, huh?" Yuuto looked up at the ceiling and sighed a long sigh. Of course, he'd expected this development, but it had occurred much more quickly than he'd anticipated. If the Bifröst and Álfheimr civilians joined in, the revolt would escalate even more quickly, and there would be no hope of remedying the situation. He needed to come up with a plan, and he needed to do it fast.

"Though, solving the problem at the root would defeat the purpose of all this."

"Correct. Without any inconvenience, the people will want to stay here permanently and will refuse to relocate."

"Yup..."

Yuuto's eventual goal was to move everyone to Europe. He'd managed to get them to travel this far by using the threat of the Flame Clan, but now that they were all settled, it would be incredibly difficult to get them to move again. He had to make them feel uncomfortable somehow.

“It seems we’re stuck between a rock and a hard place, as they say. A vexing situation, indeed,” Botvid replied.

“Hmm...” Yuuto put his hand on his chin in thought. He’d wanted to take a bit of time to relax and let his army rest and recuperate, but that didn’t seem to be in the cards anymore.

He made a decision. Compared to battling Oda Nobunaga, this decision was small peanuts. A smirk appeared on Yuuto’s face as he raised a finger.

“I’ve got it. I’ve thought of a way we can keep the civilians inconvenienced, but lower their dissatisfaction toward the refugees at the same time. Listen up...”

“My Lord, you must set an example for your subjects. This is unbecoming of you!”

“Precisely! You need to consider your influence as the þjóðann!”

“Please, return to the palace at once!”

A barrage of panicked protests could be heard from several members of Yuuto’s retinue. More specifically, the officials of Glaðsheimr and the Sword Clan, including Fagrahvél and Alexis, were beside themselves, while behind them his old allies Jörgen and Botvid smirked as though this didn’t surprise them in the least. He would have liked them to have lent him a hand instead of looking smug, but they’d decided to play bystander here, it seemed. This time it looked like he was on his own. They really could be cruel when they wanted to be...

“I’m setting an example for them, though,” Yuuto replied calmly, lying atop the grass. Honestly, compared to the stuffiness of the palace, he found this far more relaxing.

“Even so, it’s simply unheard of for a þjóðann and his family to live in a tent!” Fagrahvél shouted, echoing the feelings of everyone present. To her, the position of þjóðann was sacred, a presence that should never set foot on the battlefield or live like the common man, let alone as a refugee in a tent.

“Well, now you’ve heard of it.” To their chagrin, Yuuto was uncompromising,

even grinning in calm amusement as he spoke. The refugees' dissatisfaction came from comparing their previous well-off lifestyle to their current one. But what if the divine emperor, who sat at the apex, deigned to live in a tent of his own volition? Unable to stomach living in the palace while their ruler sweated it out alone in a tent on the ground, his vassals would likely follow suit. And if the refugees saw such esteemed presences living like they did, Yuuto hoped that it would make them see their living conditions as more bearable.

"That may be true, but still..." When Yuuto explained this to his retinue, Fagrahvél seemed to still have some reservations. Though she seemed to understand the logic, it didn't change her feelings on the matter.

"We're not in a position where we can worry about appearances right now," Yuuto said bluntly. "What matters is whether or not it's effective. If we let a revolt break out, we'll have a real problem on our hands that'll take ten times the effort and cost to quell."

"Ngh...! I...I understand." Fagrahvél begrudgingly assented. She had led an entire nation as the patriarch of the Sword Clan, so she was of course well aware of just how destructive an escalated revolt could potentially be. It was highly likely that this time, they'd be able to prevent it with something as simple as living in a tent, and fortunately, Yuuto was used to sleeping on the ground thanks to his experiences camping out on the battlefield. If they could nip the refugees' anxiety in the bud with such a simple action, it'd be the safest and most cost-effective plan.

"But that doesn't mean you need to go along with it too, you know, Mitsuki? Our kids, at least, need to be up in the palace." Yuuto stole a glance at Mitsuki, carrying their twin children, standing beside him. They were both not even a year old, still with physical constitutions that could be compromised by even the smallest of matters. It was much safer for them to stay in the palace.

"I think it'll be fine. I'll be here with them, after all, and many of the refugees are also with children." Mitsuki smiled, saying she didn't mind. Come to think of it, she had elected to move from the far more advanced and convenient 21st-century Japan to an underdeveloped Yggdrasil because she'd wanted to be with him. She was probably resolved to weather at least this much. "Not to mention, your plan will be more effective if we're here with you, right?"

“When you put it like that...you make a good point.” If Yuuto alone stayed in the tent, some might express dissatisfaction that his family was still living large in the palace, and dissatisfaction was something that traveled and increased through word of mouth. It was entirely possible the situation could explode into something irreparable before they knew it. However, if his family went with him, it would show the refugees how serious Yuuto was, and might just be the key to extinguishing the embers before they became full-blown flames.

“Man, I’m always giving you and our kids the short end of the stick. I’m really sorry for that.”

“You’re not allowed to apologize, daddy.” Mitsuki jokingly responded to Yuuto’s apology with a reference to an old period piece that only fellow Japanese citizens would understand. By deliberately replying with a joke, he knew Mitsuki was attempting to ease Yuuto’s guilt, and he was incredibly grateful for her consideration. It made him realize once again how amazing of a wife she was.

While that was going on, Sigrún and Albertina were in the palace courtyard, face-to-face.

“Sorry to call you out like this when you’ve just returned from a long trip, but there’s something I absolutely have to confirm.” Sigrún waved her wooden sword as she spoke. She still couldn’t use her right hand properly, so she used her left. That being said, in the past half month, even when traveling from Glaðsheimr to Utgarðar, she had continued to swing that sword with her left hand as part of her training, so she had gotten quite used to it at this point.

“Nah, I don’t mind. I’ve been cooped up on a ship all this time, so I was kinda hoping for an opportunity to get some exercise.” Albertina responded, hopping up and down as if warming up.

“That’s right, if Big Sis Al says so, then it must be fine.” Kristina, in her usual emotionless tone, chimed in, but Sigrún couldn’t help but notice it seemed even colder than usual. Perhaps that was just her imagination? It was almost like she was pouting over something.

“Is something wrong, Kristina?”

“Nope, nothing. Now can we begin already?” Contrary to her words, her reply was prickly. Now that the ice in Sigrún’s heart had melted, she’d come to understand the nuances of others’ emotions more than before, but she still wasn’t quite so great at it. She had no clue what had gotten Kristina so upset, and if she didn’t answer when asked, there was nothing Sigrún could do about it.

“Sure, I have no problem with getting right to it. Let’s begin.” There was no point dwelling on something she couldn’t understand, so it was best to get right down to business.

“I’m ready for you anytime,” Albertina said with a nod, brandishing her knife and holding it at the ready.

“In that case... Begin!” Seeing both combatants take their stances, Kristina’s voice rang out as she brought her hand down to signal the beginning of the match. In the next instant, Albertina’s figure vanished from Sigrún’s vision.

“Hm.” But Sigrún didn’t panic for even a single second and raised her wooden sword. She felt the impact in her arm as a dull noise resounded.

“Huh?! But you weren’t even looking this way!” Albertina let out a cry of surprise as she was repelled backward, but she landed on her feet with alacrity. She was as limber as always.

“I can discern your intentions even without looking,” Sigrún responded coolly. The Realm of the Water Mirror was a mental technique which turned the user’s consciousness into a mirror of water that reflected the intentions of their opponent. This was the skill Sigrún had awakened to during the life-or-death battle with Shiba, the skill that’d allowed her to react at superhuman speed. During that battle it had been the product of complete coincidence, but now that she’d experienced it once her body had remembered the sensation to a degree. Through the course of continuing her training over the past half-month, she’d been able to reach the point where she could now perfectly replicate and control it.

“It’s pointless to hold back. Come at me with all you have.”

“Roger!” Freely admitting she’d been pulling her punches, Albertina charged forward—or so Sigrún thought, but then she took a hard turn to the side. In the

next instant, pieces of gravel came sailing toward Sigrún, even though Sigrún hadn't seen Albertina pick them up. It was enough to take even Sigrún by complete surprise. She managed to dodge two of them and sent the third one flying with her wooden sword, but Albertina was able to close the distance between them in the meantime. She delivered a sideways strike, but Sigrún's sword was already in position to deflect it.

"Wha—? Again?! How?!" Albertina's eyes went wide with surprise. To her, it probably felt like she was being toyed with by something supernatural.

"Hm. Well, I can say you're an interesting opponent, at least." Sigrún nodded, confirming something in her mind. Yuuto had praised Albertina as a genius assassin, and now Sigrún could see that it wasn't just flattery. While she seemed like she was going to fight fairly, she used one attack after another not listed in any swordsman's rule book. However, that had made the battle all the more exciting.

"Maaan, I didn't even land a single hit. In that case, let's try...this!" Apparently sensing that she wasn't going to be able to touch Sigrún with her current methods, she seemed to be changing tack by sending blow after blow at Sigrún. Each of her strikes were impossibly fast. She was using a dagger-sized wooden sword to begin with, but even so, the torque she exerted was incredible.

"Hm, I see now." To Albertina's dismay, Sigrún evaded most of those strikes with ease and used her sword to block the ones that she couldn't. She didn't allow a single hit to land on her. After what was essentially her coup de grâce, Albertina had expended all her stamina by unleashing that last-ditch attack. She fell to her knees, then on all fours, panting heavily.

"Seems you still have much to learn. Back then, I thought I sensed greater potential, but was it just my imagination?" Without a drop of sweat on her, Sigrún tilted her head, unsatisfied. The intentions she'd been able to read from Shiba during their battle had been far more vivid.

"Well, um... I was only able to do that stuff 'cos it was a real battle where my life hung in the balance, so I had to concentrate and give it everything I had," Albertina explained weakly.

"So you're saying you were even more amazing than *that*...?" Kristina

muttered in disbelief as she looked on.

“Well, it was good practice, at least. Seems like my techniques have regained their polish, and my body now moves like it used to. That was all I needed to know,” Sigrún muttered, nodding to herself. As she turned away, her eyes shone with the light of determination.

“Sorry to disrupt you during your rest, Father, but I have a request.” In the tent designated as Yuuto’s office space, Yuuto was in the middle of looking over the report letters when Sigrún approached him, her face even more stern than usual.

“What’s brought this on?” Yuuto couldn’t help but blink in surprise. After all, he couldn’t recall Sigrún ever asking anything of him before, save for maybe asking for him to pet her head after a successful battle.

“It seems you’re in the middle of something. Would you rather I come back when you’re not busy?”

“Nah, you’re fine. A request from you takes priority over all this other stuff.” Setting the stack of letters on a nearby desk, he turned to face Sigrún. It went without saying, but her achievements in battle dwarfed those of any other member of the Steel Clan—there were far too many to count. However, if he was asked whether or not he felt Sigrún had been properly rewarded for all her exploits, the honest answer would be a resounding no. If there was something he could do to try and fix that, something that might make her happy, he’d be all for it, but she was a stoic warrior who seemed to have no interest in wealth, fame, or land. He’d been trying to come up with something to reward her with, and now she had a request of her own volition. This was his chance to finally repay her. In other words, it took priority over all else.

“In that case...I want you to bear witness.”

“Bear witness? To what?” His first thought was that one of the senior clan members was getting married or having a child. Sigrún might have seemed Spartan in nature, but the truth was she really looked after everyone around her, so such a conclusion wasn’t out of the realm of possibility. However, Sigrún’s answer was completely out of left field for Yuuto.

“I want you to bear witness to a no-holds-barred duel between myself and Hilda.”

“Whaaa?!” Yuuto let out a surprised yelp completely unlike him as his eyes bugged out of his head. “What in the world caused you to want to do that?!” he asked in a panic as a mountain of questions raced around in his mind. When she’d first joined the clan, Hilda—Hildegard—had been a cheeky brat that was prone to starting fights, but as of late, she’d seemingly gotten along with Sigrún as though she was her real sister. In fact, during the recent Second Battle of Glaðsheimr, Yuuto had heard that Hildegard had even fought a desperate battle of her own in order to save Sigrún. So why had it come to this?

“Sorry, but you’re both important pillars of the Steel Clan! I can’t risk losing one of you, so surely you understand there’s no way I can allow that!” As much as he wanted to reward Sigrún, this was out of the question. There may not have been anyone currently living in the New World, but he couldn’t guarantee there would be no territorial disputes from neighboring tribes after they had moved the refugees. In other words, he couldn’t afford to lose either of them because of some impulsive duel.

“Huh?” Sigrún replied with a confused look on her face, though that was soon followed by a wry smile of understanding. “Ah, forgive me. It seems like my poor choice of words has made you misunderstand. Rest assured, we’ll be fighting with wooden swords. However, it won’t be a mere sparring match. We’ll be giving it our all.”

“O-Oh, I see. Well, in that case, I have no objections. Don’t scare me like that!”

“I truly apologize.”

“Nah, it’s fine, really.” Waving his hand, he let out a very long sigh. He had a host of other problems he had to deal with besides, so adding the prospect of his children dueling to the death had honestly made his blood run cold.

“Wait, as strong as they are, couldn’t they easily kill each other with wooden swords if they went all out?” That worry crossed Yuuto’s mind suddenly, but they were also masters of their craft. There was probably no need for concern. Above all—

“So then, will you accept my request?” Sigrún wore the serious expression of one about to head off to battle, as if she had a score she was determined to settle. Faced with that expression, there was no way Yuuto could refuse.

“Haaah!”

“Whoa!”

Letting out a yelp of surprise, Homura stumbled backward in the face of Hildegard’s powerful attack.

“Ha!” Seeing her chance, Hildegard moved to close the distance and deliver the finishing blow. The Hildegard of a few months ago would have swung wildly, but she had grown since then. Her strikes were small but fast, designed to put pressure on her opponent. Even Homura had constantly been on the defensive in this match, unable to see an opening. Now that Hildegard had her preoccupied with defending—

“Hya!”

“Ah?!”

She used the direction of her gaze and the movement of her shoulders as a feint to lure Homura to defend against an attack from above. When Homura raised her arms to block, Hildegard didn’t let that opportunity pass her by. Hildegard’s wooden sword went right for Homura’s thigh.

“Ouch!” Homura leapt up, holding her leg in pain. Of course, Hildegard had stopped the momentum of her hand the moment the sword made contact with Homura’s thigh, but it must have hurt all the same.

“That makes it three to one. Looks like I’m on track to win today!” Hildegard gave a smug grin as she tapped her wooden sword against her shoulder.

“Mrrgh... The first time we fought I won so easily! How’d you get so strong?” Homura pouted with tears in her eyes as she rubbed her sore thigh. Though her voice contained a hint of frustration, she showed no signs of harboring any sort of hatred or murderous intent toward Hildegard. Perhaps because their ages—or rather, their mental ages—were similar, and because Homura had acknowledged Hildegard as a powerful opponent, they had taken quite a liking

to each other during this half-month-long journey. It had become a daily routine for the two to spar with each other, just as they were doing now.

“Ha ha, y’know, Homura, you might be crazy fast, but your movements are simple. After fighting you every day, even I can hold my own against you now,” Hildegard said smugly. Just as Homura had said, the first duel session they’d had against each other had resulted in a slew of crushing losses for Hildegard. However, now that Hildegard had gotten a read on exactly how Homura moved and had learned her quirks and habits, she had been able to devise a plan of attack, leading to her current status as the running victor. “After all, you’ve got a huuuge weak point.” Hildegard fanned the flames by smirking at Homura.

Truthfully, Homura was incredibly weak to feints. That wasn’t because Hildegard’s feints were particularly high-level or anything. As a matter of fact, the more obvious the feint, the more Homura was successfully deceived. Homura was ridiculously strong, so most people probably hadn’t noticed, but she was easier to read than an open book. Once you recognized her patterns, it was easy to rack up wins against her.

“Whaaat?! A weak point?! Where?! What is it?!”

“There’s no way I’d tell you, is there?”

“Come on! Don’t be such a meanie!”

“Calling me names isn’t gonna change my answer. Spot it on your own.” Homura seemed interested in her supposed weak point and needled Hildegard for the answer, but Hildegard refused. It may have seemed cruel, but this method was actually something Hildegard had learned from Sigrún herself. “You’ll find more value in the answer if you arrive at it yourself instead of someone telling you.”

Hildegard herself knew it was true from her own experiences. That was why, for Homura to grow, she had to employ some tough love—was the motive on the surface. The true reason was simply that she didn’t want her loss count to rise anymore.

“Rrgh... Fine, I get it! Then one more duel! I’ll find the answer during that battle, and then I’ll win!”

“Heh, try if you can. I’ll just knock you back down.” Hildegard acted like she was all high and mighty, but inside she was sweating bullets. In truth, while Homura’s movements became more polished by the day in addition to her already ridiculous speed, she still had a number of things she had to improve on. However, she had been able to match Hildegard even with those novice tendencies, showing once again just how insane the power of a twin-runed Einherjar could be.

Even so, now that she had decided to play the part of the cool older sister, there was no way Hildegard would allow herself to lose.

“Okaaay, you ready?”

“You bet!”

The two warriors bent their knees and were just about to kick off the ground when—

“Oh, so this is where you were, Hildegard? Hm? And Miss Homura is here too?”

“Mother Rún? Wait... You’re here as well, Your Majesty?”

“Huh? Mr. Yuuto?”

Sigrún and Yuuto appeared, causing Hildegard and Homura to freeze in place. The two looked strangely sterner than usual. Surely they couldn’t have figured out that Hildegard had been secretly pilfering all the dried meat during their journey? Yuuto was there as well, so that had to be it. Stealing rations was a major no-no in the Steel Clan, but it wasn’t like she could help it. She’d unleashed her beast form during the second battle of Glaðsheimr, and she’d been sooo hungry...

“Hilda.”

“I’m sorry!” The moment Sigrún called her name, Hildegard bowed down with enough force that her forehead touched her knees. At times like these, it was important to apologize right off the bat. She knew from experience she could save herself a lot of trouble by just admitting to what she’d done rather than coming up with some hare-brained excuse.

“Huh? What are you apologizing for?” But Sigrún frowned, as though she didn’t understand what Hildegard meant.

“Wait... What?”

“Shit, I screwed up,” she thought to herself, but it was too late now. She was so used to getting scolded that she’d automatically jumped into apology mode, but it appeared that Yuuto and Sigrún hadn’t come to scold her.

“Or could it be that you’ve done something you need to apologize for?”

“A-Ah, well, that is to say...” she stammered. It seemed that by poking the bush, she’d accidentally angered the snake within. Feeling Sigrún’s icy glare upon her, Hildegard trembled. Convinced she was going to be hit, she shut her eyes and braced herself, but no matter how long she waited, Sigrún’s fist never landed on her head. Opening her eyes to a squint, she saw Sigrún sigh.

“Well, we’ll save that inquiry for later. Father has taken time out of his extraordinarily busy schedule to be with us, after all.”

“Th-Then that means—! I’m finally going to receive His Majesty’s direct Chalice?!” Hildegard had previously asked Sigrún about receiving Yuuto’s Chalice, and Sigrún had assured her that she would discuss it with Yuuto sometime soon. Was this finally the moment?! Her heart fluttered with anticipation.

“Huh? Ah, yeah, I did hear about that. But this is a different matter,” said Yuuto.

“Aww.” Hildegard dropped to her knees on all fours in disappointment. She felt like she’d truly proved her worth in her last battle and was sure that this was finally going to be her moment, so the shock was doubly devastating.

“Hah, you’re always so animated, Hilda. I never get tired of watching you.” Yuuto was unable to hold in his laughter. This caused Hildegard’s face to grow hot with embarrassment. She had shown a shameful side of herself to Yuuto twice now, so she almost resented Sigrún for bringing Yuuto with her today of all days.

Come to think of it, didn’t she also previously wet herself in front of him...?

“Oh man, it’s over. At this rate, I’ll never get that promotion. My life’s over. I should just die.”

If that happened, she’d take Sigrún along with her. Of course, she had no intention of actually dying, but it certainly sounded like a good option right about now.

“Hildegard, do you want my Chalice?” That was when Yuuto bent down and looked into Hildegard’s eyes. The question sounded like a test to her.

“W-Well, yes. I-If you’ll have me, that is...!” Hildegard answered warily. She didn’t think he would joke around about something like this, at least not in front of her, yet she couldn’t read Yuuto’s true intentions.

“Then duel Rún right now. If you win, I’ll give you my direct Chalice.” The corners of Yuuto’s mouth turned up in a grin as if goading her on.

“R-Really?! A-Are you being serious?!” Her head snapped up in surprise, and she jumped at the opportunity immediately.

Everyone within the Múspell Unit lived under the same roof. Naturally, she knew that Sigrún’s right arm was injured, and she couldn’t move it like she used to. While she didn’t think for a second she could win against a fully healed Sigrún (or rather, she’d lost every single duel against her so far), with Sigrún only having her left arm at her disposal, this might be her chance! Suddenly, she felt like doing her best.

“Yeah, it’s a promise. If you can win against Rún, my Chalice is yours.”

“Forgive me, Father, but I don’t think you should give out Chalicees so arbitrarily...”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but weren’t you the one that wanted to set this up someday?”

“Huh?!” Hildegard couldn’t help but turn to face Sigrún when she heard that. Sigrún had told her she’d grant Hildegard an audience with Yuuto sometime soon, but this was news to her.

“Well, yes, but...” Sigrún looked a bit embarrassed as she avoided Hildegard’s gaze. She’d probably kept quiet because it hadn’t been set in stone yet, and she

didn't want to give her false hope. If it had been Hildegard, she would've told Sigrún immediately so that she could be in her debt, but that was just the type of person Sigrún was.

She always looks after everyone, but her brand of kindness is so incomprehensible sometimes. Hildegard was always struggling to try and understand Sigrún, and as a result, she often ended up regretting her thoughts and actions after the fact. Really, it was tough having such an awkward mentor.

"Well, I gotta prod you a little to make you do your best, don't I?" Yuuto, for his part, spoke casually—enough that it made Hildegard wonder if he truly understood the gravity his own Chalice held.

"It makes sense, but is that really all right?" Sigrún asked.

"Yeah, it's fine. If you have a problem with it, all you have to do is win."

"I see. That's a good point." With an enlightened nod, Sigrún removed her Garmr cloak. In the next moment, a sharply honed, fierce aura of murderous intent stabbed into Hildegard.

"Seems like you're even more serious than before," Hildegard said with a strained laugh.

Does she not want me to have His Majesty's Chalice that badly? No. She wouldn't be that shortsighted. There must be some other reason.

She knew that much.

"But His Majesty's Chalice is on the line. I can't lose!"

"Seems like you've found your resolve. Good." Sigrún held her wooden sword in front of her. Contrary to the murderous aura emanating from her, it was a rather relaxed stance. At a glance, it might've looked like she was full of openings, but alarm bells resounded in Hildegard's head. If she carelessly chose her approach, she'd be the one in danger. Sigrún's good arm might've been out of commission, but regardless, she was an opponent Hildegard couldn't afford to underestimate.

"Combatants, are you ready?" Yuuto raised his hand.

"Absolutely."

“...I’m ready.” Hildegard closed her eyes and held her own wooden sword at the ready.

She’d already switched into battle mode. Nothing mattered anymore except the opponent in front of her. Even thoughts of Yuuto’s Chalice had disappeared from her mind. Such trivialities would only dull her blade, and she knew from experience that the sharpness of a blade meant the difference between life and death.

Confirming the two warriors’ stances, Yuuto took a breath and shouted out.

“Very well. Begin!”

The instant Yuuto brought his hand down, Sigrún rushed forward before Hildegard even had a chance to react.

Sigrún had always let Hildegard take the initiative in their training matches, so this took her completely by surprise. Not to mention, Sigrún’s movements seemed faster than usual.

“Ngh!” With a metallic clang, Hildegard managed to repel Sigrún’s initial attack, but she quickly followed up with a flurry of attacks, immediately putting Hildegard on the defensive.

A bizarre, contradictory sensation assailed her. Compared to the blows she’d become familiar with while sparring with Homura, it was as if Sigrún’s sword was moving in slow motion. But then, why did each of her strikes seem to be quicker than Homura’s?!

“Guh!” Hildegard immediately leapt backward. She sensed that remaining within Sigrún’s strike zone any longer would not end well for her. She needed to distance herself to regain her footing.

“This has to be that ‘Shrinking’ thing, right?” As she made an effort to recenter herself, she tried to guess at the cause of the discrepancy. The full name of the skill she was referring to was the Shrinking Land—a move devised by the late Skáviðr and named by Yuuto. Sigrún had practiced it until she’d mastered it, and she could now use it to get her opponents to perceive her movements as faster than they actually were, delaying their reactions to her attacks in the process. In other words, it was a prime example of the old saying

that the most powerful secret techniques were rooted deep within the fundamentals.

“Still, she’s never used it as proficiently as this! She must’ve picked up some sort of trick in her recent battles!” Hildegard had tried so hard to catch up to her, and just when she thought they were finally on equal footing, she was going to be left in the dust again. She thought she’d gotten so much stronger too... Truthfully, the reason she’d been able to fare so well against Homura might have been due to the immaturity of her opponent, but even so, she was able to put up a good fight against a twin-runed Einherjar. She’d thought for sure that the gap between her and Sigrún would’ve closed at least a little, but those gains seemed so inconsequential now...

“You’re not going to come at me like you always do? Then I’ll do the honors.” Sigrún took one step forward, then another, closing the distance between them gradually as she taunted the frozen Hildegard.

“Ngh...” Hildegard took a reflexive, frightened step backward. Even though this wasn’t a match where her life was on the line, her body trembled, and her teeth started to chatter. The *intensity* Sigrún exuded was simply too much to bear.

“So this is Mother Rún—Mánagarmr, the Strongest Silver Wolf—when she’s serious!” Hildegard swallowed in fear. Sigrún’s aura was the kind that only one who had weathered countless battles, cut down countless warriors, and cheated death countless times could give off.

Hildegard was not yet at that level. She simply didn’t have the same kind of experience.

Frankly speaking, they were on two different playing fields.

“Psh, no big deal?!” Chiding her own weakness, Hildegard’s expression changed to a mischievous grin, and instead of taking any more steps backward, she put a foot forward. She respected and admired Sigrún from the bottom of her heart, but she wasn’t going to let Sigrún look down upon her forever either.

As a pupil, it was said that the best way to repay your instructor for all they’d done was to surpass them. She couldn’t let herself be intimidated by Sigrún here, especially when she’d lost the use of her good arm and wasn’t even in

perfect form. If she didn't have the guts to face Sigrún head-on, Hildegard would never reach her.

"Hmph, I wouldn't have it any other way." Seeing Hildegard step forward, Sigrún's mouth also turned up in a grin. She looked somewhat glad—as if the pupil she'd invested so much of her time and effort into cowing to that level of pressure would've greatly disappointed her.

"I'll wipe that leisurely grin off your face," Hildegard said.

"Then try it."

With those words, the two simultaneously kicked off the ground.

Clack! Clack! Clack!

The clashing of wooden swords resounded throughout. Hildegard was now the one on the offensive. Continuing to play defense would only once again render her a sitting duck to Sigrún's continuous warp attacks. In this case, a strong offense was the best defense. Like a ferocious gale, she delivered a frenzy of blows. However—

"Something feels off. Why aren't my attacks getting through to her?!"

This new bizarre sensation left Hildegard bewildered. There was hardly any resilience, as if she was hitting a blanket or piece of cloth instead. She felt like her attacks weren't doing any damage, like their power was being absorbed.

"There's no way... She's using the Willow Technique?! But this is on a whole other level!"

This was another technique of the deceased Skáviðr's. By skillfully redirecting the strength of her opponent's attacks, Sigrún could prevent her hands and arms from going numb while blocking and deflecting incoming blows while also staggering her opponent. However, there was no question that this technique of Sigrún's lacked the "gentleness" it'd had before.

That settled it. Sigrún must've come to realize *something* during her fight with Shiba.

"My turn. Get ready," Sigrún stated.

“Tch?!”

Weaving through the gap in Hildegard’s attacks, Sigrún’s powerful counterattack put Hildegard back on the defensive, reversing their roles in no time. Hildegard tried to retaliate, but Sigrún wouldn’t let her get a hit in. Even though each of Hildegard’s attacks should have been stronger and faster than Sigrún’s, Hildegard was overtaken instantaneously, forced to dance to the rhythm of her opponent.

“Yeah, she’s way stronger than before!”

Hildegard unconsciously clucked her tongue. For the past two years under Sigrún’s rigorous guidance, she felt she’d evolved and improved by leaps and bounds as a warrior, yet Sigrún was still that much stronger. The difference in strength between the two of them was painfully apparent; in fact, her genius-level talent for fighting practically made her a monster.

“Even so, I won’t let her get one up on me!”

Sure, she was strong—frighteningly so. But she was down one arm right now.

“She’s good. But she doesn’t scare me.” As the two exchanged blows, Hildegard calmly assessed the situation. In other words, she was collected enough to where she could *afford* to assess the situation.

Sigrún’s techniques were incredible—so much so that Hildegard wanted to sigh in admiration at their beauty. The overwhelming aura she emitted as she fought was also as impressive as it was terrifying. However, without the strength of her good arm, Sigrún didn’t have the *muscle* she needed to finish the job. That was her downfall. Her attacks had reduced speed and lessened force since she wasn’t using her proper arm, and there were even some traces of awkwardness in her strikes, stagnating the flow of her attacks. That was why she couldn’t clinch the victory.

“‘There is naught but a hair’s breadth between victory and defeat,’ was it?” She recalled the strict words Sigrún was always chiding her with. It might seem like a big difference at a glance, especially if the victor was unscathed and the loser ended up dead, but the surprising truth was that victory and defeat were only separated by the thinnest of margins.

“And right now, Mother Rún doesn’t have the strength to make up that final small difference!”

The fact that Hildegard was still standing and able to fight right now was all the proof she needed.

She was beginning to understand why Sigrún had challenged her to this duel in the first place. She was probably looking for an opportunity to find her resolve—to come up with an answer to something.

“Then as her pupil, it’s my duty to help her find that answer!” Choosing a rapid attack meant to put pressure on her opponent, she countered Sigrún’s strike. Just as Sigrún had taught her, she skillfully moved her center of gravity and used her body weight, the elasticity of her legs, and her arm strength to deliver the strongest attack possible with the minimum amount of movement used.

“Guh?!” Sigrún’s left arm jerked backward. If her right arm had been in a usable state, that never would’ve happened.

“Haaah!” Hildegard didn’t miss that opportunity and delivered a powerful side slash.

“Gh!” Hildegard was confident the attack would connect and Sigrún wouldn’t be able to dodge it, but she ended up slashing air instead. Sigrún had jumped backward and evaded. Her reaction speed was completely different from before.

“It couldn’t be... Realm of Godspeed?!”

Sigrún’s decision to enter the Realm of Godspeed in what was essentially a mock battle made it clear to Hildegard just how serious she was about winning this duel. That meant Hildegard had no choice but to respond in kind. Raising her wooden sword, she stepped forward, and with a yell, slashed downwards with all her might.

“Too slow!” Perhaps because of her Realm of Godspeed state, Sigrún was able to deflect Hildegard’s strike, knocking her sword aside. However, Hildegard had been on the receiving end of this technique many a time. She turned her wrist, and without correcting the trajectory of the sword, turned it into a diagonal upward slash.

“Ngh!”

“Yaahh!”

There was a clang, and then the sound of something spinning through the air—Sigrún’s wooden sword. It then clattered to the ground. Hildegard’s own sword was thrust at Sigrún’s neck.

“I am beaten.” Sigrún raised both hands quietly in surrender.

“So I win, then?”

“Indeed. It seems like I can’t best you with only my left arm usable,” she said sadly. She opened and closed her left hand as if checking if it still functioned. Perhaps she felt frustration at not being able to put as much strength into it as she wanted.

“At any rate, I’ve made up my mind.” Sigrún stood up, picking up her cloak which she’d laid on top of a nearby boulder. It was a rare item—only one existed in the entire world—fashioned from the pelt of the Great Wolf Garmr who ruled the Himinbjörg Mountains, felled by none other than Sigrún herself. She now held it out in front of Hildegard.

“Huh? What are you...?” Hildegard was confused.

“Take it, it’s yours. From this day forward, you are now Mánagarmr, the Strongest Silver Wolf.”

“H-Huuuuh?!” Hildegard couldn’t stop herself from recoiling in shock. It was a complete and utter bolt from the blue. Sure, she had aspired to one day take the title of Mánagarmr from Sigrún, but she’d thought it might be a few years from now, certainly not today.

“B-But...I still have so far to go... My techniques still need practice. That should be evident enough from this battle alone...”

“That is true. However, there is no doubt you are currently stronger than me. I’m certain of it.”

Hildegard didn’t know how to respond to that, so she stayed silent. But in this case, her silence was affirmation in itself. The truth was that she didn’t think she would lose to the current Sigrún, no matter how many times they were to

face off against each other.

“The title of Mánagarmr is reserved for the strongest warrior in the Steel Clan. That’s why it belongs to you.” Sigrún somewhat forcibly pressed the Garmr Cloak into Hildegard’s hands, as if to say she couldn’t refuse.

The cloak felt abnormally heavy in her hands, even though the material itself was relatively light. Mánagarmr, the Strongest Silver Wolf. It was as if she was feeling the weight of that moniker that absolutely did not allow failure.

“Th-Then I’ll take it. But only temporarily. You’re gonna take it back from me when you’re able to, right?!” she asked anxiously, as if clinging to a tiny hope. She was still in training. There was still so much she had yet to master, so she was uncertain that she could fulfill such a grand role.

“...I don’t think that will be possible. My left arm hurts a bit as well, you see.”

“Ah...” Then she noticed. There had indeed been times where it seemed like Sigrún’s left arm was moving stiffly. That was probably due to the pain.

“Normally, I don’t feel it, but when I put strength into my arm, it starts to throb with pain. It’s probably a side effect of using the Realm of Godspeed.”

“O-Oh no...”

“Well, it won’t restrict me in my daily activities, but this is a crossroads for me. I’ve decided to start commanding our unit from the rear and focus on training my successors, the new blood.” She seemed wistful, but at the same time relieved as she smiled. Perhaps this battle with Hildegard had helped her come to terms with her decision. “So...I leave the rest to you.” She lightly hit Hildegard in the chest, but it was Sigrún’s words that made an impact within Hildegard’s heart. They were the words that she’d always hoped she’d hear. It was for that purpose that she’d given her very best every single day. But this wasn’t the way she’d hoped it would go. She’d wanted to succeed Sigrún through her own merits when she was much stronger—and without a handicap.

This was a big responsibility. A frightening one that she wasn’t sure she could handle. Honestly, she wanted to run away. Her chest burned with anxiety. But even so—yes, even so, she wasn’t about to let the title of Strongest Silver Wolf or the Garmr Cloak slip out from under her. She wouldn’t allow anyone else to

inherit them besides her.

There was only one option.

“I’ll become stronger. Way, way stronger than I am now. Strong enough that I’ll even be able to beat you at your best, Mother Rún!”

“Hee hee. Keep up that attitude and you just might.” Sigrún chuckled in satisfaction and nodded.

As if preordained by fate, Sigrún had lost her strength once her battle had ended, begetting a brand-new successor to the title of Strongest Silver Wolf. Perhaps that turn of events symbolized the end of a long era of war, and at the same time, the dawn of a new age.

“Wheeew, now I can finally take a breather.”

By the time he’d returned to his own tent after witnessing Sigrún and Hildegard’s duel, it was already late into the evening. It had been a productive, yet chaotically busy day. Coupled with the fatigue of having been on the road for half a month, Yuuto was absolutely exhausted.

“Oh, welcome back!” Mitsuki grinned as she invited him in, one of their children in her arms. She seemed to be in the middle of breastfeeding Nozomu. For a moment, he thought he might like to be breastfed as well, but of course he stopped that train of thought before it reached the station. For him to even consider something so stupid proved just how tired he was.

“I’m home.” Yuuto made his way as far as the carpet before he simply gave up and dropped to the floor. He couldn’t muster the energy to stand any longer.

“You must’ve gotten a lot accomplished.”

“Mm, well, you could say that,” he said as he looked around the tent. The outside might have seemed shabby, but there was no doubt that the interior had been adorned to accommodate the þjóðann. Even though winter was approaching, the inside was completely warm. With this, he wouldn’t have to worry about his children falling ill.

“Hm? Oh, Miku, you’ve learned to crawl already?” Out of the corner of his

eye, he saw the older of the twins, Miku, crawling toward him.

“Hee hee, Nozomu can too, you know. He started crawling about half a month ago, in fact.”

“Really? Damn, I’m sorry I missed that.”

Since he’d been preoccupied with the Flame Clan’s invasion, he’d had no choice, but not being around to witness the milestones of his children really did fill him with regret.

“If that’s the case, then I gotta get them to call me papa before they call you mama! Look Miku, it’s papa! Papa!” Yuuto picked himself up off the carpet, got in a sitting position, and scooped Miku up underneath her shoulders with both hands. Miku didn’t seem to mind, cooing happily on Yuuto’s lap.

“Well, would you look at that, Yuu-kun. Even though it’s been a while, she still knows who her daddy is.”

“Of course she does! I mean, if she were afraid of me or something, I’d just consider my life over.”

“Well, they say that’s a pretty common development though.”

“Are you trying to freak me out?!”

At any rate, he was relieved from the bottom of his heart that Miku still remembered him.

“Look, Nozomu! It’s your papa, back after all this time!” Mitsuki brought Nozomu over and sat him on Yuuto’s lap as well. Nozomu didn’t seem frightened either, instead studying Yuuto with curiosity and tugging at his clothes. He was probably going to be a handful when he grew up.

A feeling Yuuto couldn’t quite describe welled up from within his chest. Perhaps because he had had constant brushes with death for so long, being able to experience such a heartwarming, precious scene with his family filled him with happiness, gratitude, and at the same time an inevitable sense of guilt.

“I wonder if it’s really okay for me to be this happy,” Yuuto muttered. He knew that thinking such things would only serve to worsen his mood, and nothing good would come from it. Even so, he couldn’t help it. His mounting

anxiety compelled him to ask anyway.

“Yuu-kun...” Saying his name, Mitsuki quietly embraced him. While he felt a sense of relief at her warmth, it couldn’t completely absolve him of his guilt. Somewhere in the bottom of his heart, a little voice was whispering that he had no right to be this happy.

“Yuu-kun, you’re always trying your best to make everyone else happy. You work tirelessly at it. That’s why you’ve earned the right to be happier than anyone else.” Patting Yuuto’s back lovingly, she spoke slowly, in a tone one might adopt to make a child understand.

Warmth began to seep into his heart once more. Those were the words he’d always wanted to hear. At the same time, however, they were hard to accept.

“Yeah, I tried my best. I pushed myself beyond my limits and tried harder than I ever have before. But I can’t help but dwell on the things I could’ve done differently. What I could’ve done better.”

During the Second Battle of Glaðsheimr, many had perished. He’d tried his damndest to keep casualties to a minimum, but an inordinate amount of people had lost their lives regardless. If he’d just been stronger—if he’d been more skilled—would those people still be alive today? Would there be people among them who’d be celebrating reuniting with their families just like he was now? Was there some method that could’ve saved many more people? People who were now dead because he’d simply overlooked it?

“Everyone here in this camp thinks you’re an incredible person, Yuu-kun. Some even revere you as a god. You’ve done some great stuff that you should be proud of. But you’re human all the same. You’re not a god, so you can’t be perfect all the time.”

“Right. I know that. I understand, but...”

“No, I don’t think you do. You and I and the children are the only ones here. You’re not the divine emperor, or a reginarch, or any of that right now. It’s okay to just be Yuu-kun for a bit, you know? The good old average commoner Yuu-kun that I know so well.”

“...Why did it have to be me?” Yuuto suddenly muttered, his voice shaking.

“Right, I was just an average Japanese middle-school student, the type you could find anywhere. Average grades, no special powers... So why did I have to be the one to shoulder this responsibility?!”

He knew asking wouldn't do any good. Nobody likely had the answer. Because he had talent? Because he had divine knowledge? That was probably how the denizens of Yggdrasil would respond. But Yuuto thought that was all bullshit.

“Why did I, of all people, have to go through all this shit?! What did I even do to deserve all this?! To hell with this crap!” Anger with no outlet overtook him. If the goddess of fate hadn't decided to pull such a cruel prank on him, maybe he'd still be living a normal life in peaceful Japan. “It wasn't... It wasn't like I was the second coming of Christ or a god of war reincarnated! I was just some guy! But everyone piled all their expectations on me anyway, and I had no choice but to live up to them! All the burden was placed on me, and it was miserable!”

His feelings poured from him like a burst dam. Yuuto continued to voice his complaints for a bit longer until he realized that tears were spilling from his eyes. He knew he looked like a complete loser, the most pathetic person ever. But if he didn't say what was on his mind, his heart was going to shatter.

Mitsuki listened to each of Yuuto's complaints intently. Without screwing her face up in disgust, she gently embraced him, stroking his head. Gradually, little by little, the negative emotions within his heart began to subside, and a wave of fatigue and sleepiness took its place. No longer possessing the strength to resist, Yuuto closed his eyes.

Once she heard the gentle breathing of Yuuto's slumber, Mitsuki relaxed, letting out a sigh. Quietly repositioning her body, she laid Yuuto's head on her lap. *“Since it's Yuu-kun, he'll probably regret crying in front of me, saying he looked uncool or something like that. But I don't see it that way at all.”* Continuing to stroke his head, Mitsuki chuckled. Having the burden of tens of thousands of lives on his shoulders must've been painful. It must've been hard, just as he'd said. Most people probably would've been crushed under that pressure, or long since run away. Mitsuki herself definitely would've. But not Yuuto. Even if he'd had to grit his teeth in desperation, he'd gotten the job done.

He'd even gone head-to-head against the one, the only Oda Nobunaga. What could be cooler and more impressive than that? She was proud of him and the things he'd done. She wanted to take a megaphone and shout to the entire world that she had the best husband anyone could ever hope for.

As affection continued to well up in her heart, she softly kissed Yuuto on the cheek.

"Congratulations, Yuu-kun. You did it. So tonight, take a long-deserved rest."

Epilogue

Atop the deck of the flagship *Noah*, Yuuto stretched out his arms as he looked up at the clear blue sky.

“Ah, what a great day to set sail,” he remarked.

Despite the war against the Flame Clan having ended, a mountain of tasks had still yet remained. Day after day, Yuuto had been so embroiled in work that the months went by in a flash. Before he knew it, it had already been half a year since the Second Battle of Glaðsheimr.

A number of things had occurred in that span of time. For instance, they’d managed to smoothly emigrate five ships’ worth of refugees to the New World. However, the nearby natives of the land, likely eyeing the immigrants’ bountiful food supply, banded together to stage an attack, causing a conflict to break out. At the same time, back on Yggdrasil, the nomads to the north noticed that Utgarðar’s defenses were growing thin and had chosen to invade. And if that wasn’t enough, a war had broken out between the immigrants over the order in which they would embark—their dissatisfaction from living in tents for so long having finally reached a boiling point. As for the immigrants that had made it to the New World, many were disillusioned by the gap between reality and the ideal paradise they’d hoped for, leaving Fagrahvél and Jörgen to handle their rapidly spreading unhappiness.

All sorts of other things happened as well—yes, truly all sorts. Still, he was able to feel happy from the bottom of his heart that *this day* had finally arrived—as well as a bit forlorn.

“So, this is goodbye to Yggdrasil at last.”

Looking down on the now-abandoned harbor, Yuuto smiled wistfully. Nearly all the voyages to the New World had already departed, and the final one was getting ready to leave port. After this, he would never return to Yggdrasil again—when that thought crossed his mind, he felt tears well up in his eyes. He’d experienced countless painful hardships during his time in this land. Back when

he'd just arrived, everything had especially sucked. He'd hated Felicia, he'd cursed his fate, and he'd especially loathed his own frivolousness. He'd never regretted anything as much as when he'd lost Loptr and Fárbaudi. Even afterward, he'd felt crushing sadness at losing countless other people precious to him through the horrors of the wars he'd led them into.

With those complicated emotions swirling around in his mind— “Father, what’s wrong?” Sigrún asked him, having noticed the strange expression on his face.

“Rún, let’s leave him be. He’s probably got a lot on his mind right now,” Felicia replied.

“I suppose you’re right.” Sigrún agreed, and left it at that.

“Father, we’ve finished loading all the refugees on board,” Kris informed him.

“Yo Yuuto, preparations for departure are all done!” Ingrid yelled up from the dock.

“The wind’s looking good today!” Al said gleefully.

“Give the signal, Daddy!” demanded an overexcited Nozomu.

“Ah! Master Nozomu, please sit still!” Ephy, getting a little flustered, pleaded to the young boy.

“Time to go, Yuu-kun.”

His family, the most precious people of all to him, were right here. If Yuuto had never come to Yggdrasil, he never would’ve gotten to meet them. He found himself thinking, in the end, that he was glad he’d come. Parting with the comrades of his who’d passed away had been tough, but now he was happy from the bottom of his heart that he’d met each and every one of them. With a rush of mingled emotions, Yuuto raised his voice.

“Right then! Raise the sails! We’re heading out!”

To be continued...

Afterword

An incredibly long amount of time has passed since the last volume. To everyone who has been waiting for so long, I am truly sorry.

Long time no see. I'm Seiichi Takayama.

Anyway, this volume marks the end of the Nobunaga arc as well as the main story of *The Master of Ragnarok*. The entirety of the next volume will cover the story's epilogue.

I started writing this story in January of 2013, and when I think about the fact that eight years later I've managed to make it to twenty-two volumes, I get really emotional. During that time, drama CDs, an anime, and all sorts of other things were produced as well, so yeah, super emotional.

Nevertheless, there are still two more volumes planned!

I think I mentioned it in another afterword somewhere, but I really love it when eroge include fan discs that imagine what happens after the plot resolves. While some may enjoy the typical Hollywood formula of the credits rolling right after the main conflict is resolved, I'm the type of person that enjoys seeing what happens to the characters after the story ends, so I think I want to write a bit about what happens after our heroes reach the New World. On that note, I'd be thrilled if you'd bear with me just a little longer.

I'd also like to release a brand-new work at the same time as one of the two New World volumes, so it'd be wonderful if you could pick that up as well (advertisement time!). Basically, the premise is "what if a guy like Skáviðr ended up with a loving wife and became happy?" Or rather, though I won't be alluding to it in the story itself, this protagonist was actually Skáviðr in his previous life. Why, might you ask? Because I, Mr. Takayama, really, really liked Skáviðr as a character and wanted to give him another chance at happiness after he regretfully perished on the battlefield in *The Master of Ragnarok*.

Now then, I'm running out of pages, so to wrap things up, I'd like to give my

thanks. To everyone that gave it their all in putting this book out in the world, thank you so much! To all you readers who purchased this book, my utmost gratitude!

May we meet again in the next volume!

Seiichi Takayama

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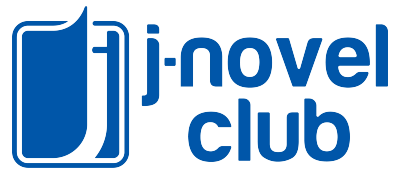
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The Master of Ragnarok & Blesser of Einherjar: Volume 22

by Seiichi Takayama

Translated by Perry Logan Edited by Aaron Brown

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